

Synopsis on the Practice of Wisdom in Buddhism (Part 2)

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9. The Object of Contemplation for Insight Meditation

From the explanations provided up to this point, we now know that the function of wisdom is the ability to distinguish, discern, and analyze. So, what exactly is the object to be distinguished, discerned, and analyzed—that is, the object of contemplation? In the *Agama Sūtra*, the Buddha once said, “If one is unable to fully understand and directly realize a single dharma, one will not attain liberation.”¹ The goal of practicing the Buddha-dharma is to attain liberation, this goal is universal to all practitioners of the three vehicles. To reach this goal, we have to rely on profound wisdom to thoroughly penetrate all dharmas. In other words, the object of contemplation in the cultivation of wisdom is all dharmas. During the process of the cultivation of wisdom, we must thoroughly penetrate the nature of emptiness and nonself in all dharmas. Penetrate the nature of emptiness is transcendental wisdom, the most important virtue in Buddhism, and its qualities are the ability to investigate all dharmas and realize the universal nature of all dharmas.

Differences between the Wisdom of the Three Vehicles and the Great Vehicle

Within the cultivation of wisdom, and based on the spiritual capacity of the practitioners, there are two categories of wisdom. One is *Śrāvakayāna* wisdom. This wisdom is also attained by *Mahāyāna* practitioners, and hence it is also called the wisdom of the three vehicles. The other is *Mahāyāna* wisdom. This wisdom is only attained by the bodhisattvas and is not found in the *Śrāvakayāna*; therefore, it is also called the unique wisdom of the *Mahāyāna*.

The difference between these two types of wisdom is the object of contemplation. For *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners, it is said that the object of their contemplation is what is “closest to them”; that is, they directly rely on their own body and mind as the objects to be investigated. For a bodhisattva, the objects that are investigated include their own mind and body but also extend to every particle of matter and phenomena apart from themselves. There is not a single item in the universe that they do not investigate thoroughly.

Essence of the Wisdom of the Three Vehicles

Examine and Investigate the Four Noble Truths and Dependent Co-arising

In the *sūtras*, it is commonly said that fully understanding the four noble truths is the wisdom of the *Śrāvakayāna*. The content of the four noble truths is [suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering.] “Suffering” refers to the defects of birth, aging, sickness, death, and so on, which all sentient

¹ Here, “fully understand and directly realize a single dharma” means that one understands any dharma in terms of its true nature.

beings must endure physically and mentally. “Origin of suffering” refers to the causes of the endless suffering of the body and mind. In other words, it is the force that leads to the resultant suffering of birth and death. “Cessation of suffering” refers to the ending of defilement and karma, which are the causes of suffering. This [third noble truth] is also the nature of stillness and nonexistence, where birth and death no longer arise. “Path leading to the cessation of suffering” is the way that guides sentient beings away from defilement and the deep pits of suffering that are life and death, and then directs them toward purity, liberation, stillness, and nirvana. The teaching on the four noble truths embodies dual sets of cause and effect: one explains cyclic existence, and the other explains liberation. The main focus of this teaching is the body and mind of sentient beings. Understanding the four noble truths is to understand the causes and effects that reveal how sentient beings suffer in cyclic existence and how they attain liberation. It is not the case that one investigates [the environment, such as] astronomy or geography without any connection to the body and mind of sentient beings.

This wisdom of insight that uses the four noble truths as its object can be further split into two aspects. One aspect is to attain the wisdom of the stability of dharmas—that is, to understand clearly the various aspects of dharmas revealed in the four noble truths.² The other aspect is to attain the wisdom of nirvana, which is to awaken to the true nature of dharmas as revealed by the four noble truths. Therefore, the wisdom of the three vehicles must include the elements of proper investigation into various aspects of dharmas and the truth. In other words, the wisdom of the three vehicles must incorporate the attainment of the wisdom of the stability of dharmas and the wisdom of nirvana.

In the Buddha’s teachings, apart from the four noble truths, he also taught about dependent co-arising. If we look at dependent co-arising in terms of the cycle of existence and the cessation of life and death, there are twelve folds.³ The teaching on twelvefold dependent co-arising begins “with ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be]; . . . with birth as condition, aging and death.”⁴ This is the cycle of existence, which is captured in the noble truths of suffering and origin of suffering. Conversely, with the cessation of ignorance up to the cessation of aging and death, this is the cessation of the cycle of existence,⁵ which is

² This wisdom focuses on understanding how dharmas come to be.

³ The twelve folds of dependent co-arising are ignorance, volitional formation, consciousness, mind and body, six sense faculties, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, existence, birth, aging, and death. (For purposes of clarity, for the fold of name and form, which refers to the mind and body of sentient beings, we have used the phrase “mind and body.”)

⁴ See Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Canada: Wisdom Publications, 2000), page 533.

⁵ The causal relationship that brings about the cessation of the cycle of life and death is captured in the following description: “‘With the cessation of what does the cessation of aging-and-death come about?’ . . . ‘When there is no birth, aging-and-death does not come to be; with the cessation of birth comes cessation of aging-and-death.’” This process applies likewise to the other folds where the cessation of the previous fold will bring about the cessation of the subsequent fold. For more details, see Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Canada: Wisdom Publications, 2000), page 602.

captured in the noble truths of cessation of suffering and path leading to the cessation of suffering.

Although the four noble truths and the twelfold dependent co-arising are presented as different teachings, their underlying meanings are not all that dissimilar. For *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners, the path is to make the vow to depart from this defiled world for the sake of ending the cycle of life and death and attaining nirvana. Accordingly, they rely on the teachings of the four noble truths or the twelfold dependent co-arising as the method of practice. Therefore, in the *Śrāvakayāna* texts, there is more emphasis on these teachings. For example, in the *Exegesis on Establishment of True Meaning*, the chapters are arranged in a sequence according to the four noble truths. Additionally, in the *Treatise on the Way to Liberation*, which originates from a branch of the Theravada school, the section on the study of wisdom begins by teaching practitioners to first understand the five aggregates, twelve cognitive bases, eighteen perceptual elements,⁶ and cause and effect concerning the cycle of birth and death. These are teachings related to the various aspects of dharmas in the world, with which a practitioner begins on the path. It then discusses the awakening to the nature of stillness that underlies impermanence and no self.

Examine the Cause and Effect Relationship in All Dharmas

The wisdom of insight belonging to *śrāvaka* practitioners may be narrow in terms of their objects of contemplation [but the underlying principle contains the essential basis of awakening to the truth]. The principle is first to observe and contemplate the cause and effect relationships manifested in the various aspects of worldly dharmas, the transcendental state, and the way to attain to the transcendental state. This principle is [essential] because if one is unable to properly understand, and have confidence in, cause and effect, one is unable to awaken to the nature of nonarising.

Therefore, with *abhidharma* texts, it is always the case that they begin with teachings on the aggregates, cognitive bases, and perceptual elements, or with form, consciousness, mental qualities arising with consciousness, conditioned dharmas independent of consciousness, and unconditioned dharmas.⁷ All of these are used to explicitly explain

⁶ The five aggregates are form, sensation, perception, volitional formation, and consciousness. The twelve cognitive bases are the six sense faculties (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind) and their respective six sense objects (forms, sounds, aromas, tastes, textures, and objects of the mind). The eighteen perceptual elements are the twelve cognitive bases plus the six consciousnesses corresponding to each sense faculty—that is, eye consciousness, ear consciousness, and so on.

⁷ “Aggregates” refers to the five aggregates, “cognitive bases” refers to the twelve cognitive bases, and “elements” refers to the eighteen perceptual elements. All these groups of dharmas are used to explain the composition of sentient beings in terms of the interactions between the physical body, the mental state, and external phenomena.

“Mental qualities arising with consciousness” refers to the mental objects that are paired with certain mental activities. For example, when the eyes see form and the eye consciousness arises, so too will arise the mental quality of awareness and, accordingly, attention toward the object will also arise. Subsequently, if the object is desirable, other mental qualities, such as craving, may also arise.

individual dharmas in terms of their common traits and their individual characteristics, their essence, function, cause, conditions, effects, and karmic results. These *abhidharma* texts also explain under what conditions a dharma is associated with or not associated with another dharma, and under what conditions a dharma is attained or not attained by another dharma. The *Lotus Sūtra* refers to the same concepts when it says, “truth has aspects of nature, truth has aspects of appearance . . . truth has aspects of karmic results, truth has aspects of consistency from beginning to end, et cetera.” Even though [in the *Lotus Sūtra*] it says that only the buddhas, among themselves, can fully comprehend these aspects, this does not mean that the *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners do not comprehend anything at all. It is merely that their understanding is not as exhaustive [as the buddhas’].

Regarding the teachings on the various aspects of dharmas, the most detailed explanations can be found in the *abhidharma* texts. In the ancient times, the *tripiṭaka* teachings of *sūtras*, *vinayas*, and *abhidharmas* were paired with the three progressive trainings of morality, meditation, and wisdom. The *abhidharma* texts are considered to focus in particular on the training of wisdom. According to the various texts of the *abhidharma*, the teachings on the training of wisdom generally begin with learning about cause and effect, knowing what is good and evil, understanding that there are past and future lives, learning that there are ordinary beings caught in cyclic existence and that there are sages who have [transcended cyclic existence and] gone beyond the three realms, and so on. Only when practitioners understand and are truly confident in these teachings are they considered to be equipped with right view (wisdom of conventional truth). This is also the foundation for, and initial stage in, the cultivation of wisdom.

Accordance with the Three Dharma Seals

Of course, attaining the wisdom of conventional truth is not enough to end the cycle of life and death. If we want liberation from cyclic existence, we must progress in our cultivation of wisdom and understand that the cyclic existence is due to defilements, and the root of defilements is ignorance. Ignorance [in terms of the aspect of knowing correctly] is that one cannot understand the true nature of all dharmas as they really are. As a result of being unable to understand the truth as it really is, one creates many attachments; this results in erroneous conduct, which is not in accord with the transcendental right view.⁸ This delusional attachment

“Conditioned dharmas independent of consciousness” refers to phenomena that manifests with or without the arising of consciousness. This group includes phenomena such as time, direction, impermanence, and so on.

“Unconditioned dharmas,” or *asaṃskṛta* in Sanskrit, is a term referring to things that transcend conditioned (*saṃskṛta*) existence in the state of *samsāra* (worldly state). The number of items deemed unconditioned varied according to the *abhidharmas* of different schools of Buddhism. Most commonly, three items were counted: the cessation (or liberation) arising through insight (*pratisaṃkhyā-nirodha*), the cessation not arising through insight (*aprasaṃkhyā-nirodha*), and space (*ākāśa*). (See *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxfordreference.com>]).

⁸ “Transcendental right view” refers to having the right view toward impermanence, suffering, emptiness, nonself, and so on. Sages are equipped with this transcendental right view and therefore do not develop attachments and defilements, which lead to erroneous conduct.

that arises from ignorance mainly stems from attachment to permanence, even though things are impermanent; attaching to things as endowed with a self, even though there is no self; attaching to things as pure, even though they are not; and attaching to experiences as pleasurable, even though they are not.⁹ Because of these delusional attachments, sentient beings develop behaviors that are not in accord with the transcendental right view and create endless unwholesome karma, which results in the suffering associated with the cycle of life and death.

Therefore, [to understand the truth] we must realize the three dharma seals. This process is the flip side of cultivating wisdom. The three dharma seals are (1) all dharmas are impermanent, (2) all dharmas are without an intrinsic self, and (3) nirvana is still. Regarding all conditioned phenomena in this world, we should properly realize the nature of impermanence through the arising and passing of each thought. Further, we should come to understand selflessness through the coming together of conditions [that give rise to each phenomenon]. We should also clearly understand that when all delusions cease to arise that this is the nature of stillness and cessation. When we can thoroughly awaken to the three dharma seals, this is the attainment of liberation without defilements, which is nirvana. The fundamental reason why we remain trapped in this world and cycle through life and death with delusions is that we are unable to properly realize and have confidence in the three dharma seals.

Regarding this [teaching on realizing the three dharma seals], the northern *Sarvāstivāda* school's teachings contain extensive explanations and detailed systematic categorizations. Although the *Sarvāstivāda* school teaches extensively about the myriad dharmas and their characteristics, true awakening comes from the school's core teaching on the gradual attainment of awakening that occurs through investigating the four noble truths and their sixteen aspects. Conversely, among the many Buddhist schools, there are two main theories regarding the attainment of awakening. The two theories are gradual awakening and sudden enlightenment. The method where one progressively awakens to the sixteen aspects of the four noble truths belongs to the theory of gradual realization. Under the sudden enlightenment theory, there is no division into aspects. Rather, with the wisdom of insight into impermanence, suffering, emptiness, nonself, and so on, one awakens to the nature of nirvana instantly—that is, to awaken to the profound truth directly.

In summary, the essence of the wisdom of the three vehicles is to examine the various aspects of dharmas manifested by the Law of Cause and Effect; conversely, it is to awaken to the nature of impermanence, nonself, emptiness, and cessation [nirvana]. It is said in the *sūtras*,

Conditioned dharmas are impermanent,

⁹ The error in viewing things as pure and in believing that certain objects and experiences are pleasurable refers to the erroneous perception held by sentient beings. Because of this error, sentient beings easily develop attachment to these objects and experiences.

their nature is to arise and cease.
After arising they cease,
their pacification is true bliss.

What this means is that after investigating all dharmas to see their true nature of impermanence, we progress to realizing things as they truly are, with no arising and completely pacified.¹⁰ The Chan school of Chinese *Mahāyāna* [interprets and] changes the last line of the above verse—“their pacification is true bliss”—to “pacification is realized.” In the process of cultivation, they also first observe momentary rising and passing of mental objects and then progress to awakening to things as they truly are, neither arising nor ceasing. This method of the Chan school and the core principle of the three-vehicle’s wisdom are very similar.

The Difference in the Object Contemplated by the *Mahāyāna* and *Śrāvakayāna* Methods

Object of Contemplation of the Mahāyāna

Whereas the object of contemplation in the wisdom of the three vehicles is the dharmas that are closest to us, the object of contemplation for the unique wisdom of the *Mahāyāna* extends to include everything in the endless universe. Although the objects to be investigated encompass everything, the first stage focuses on one’s own body and mind. With the *Mahāyāna* scriptures, it is commonly the case that one begins with investigating one’s body and mind and then extends the investigation to include countless sentient beings, endless realms of existence, and all mental states and physical objects apart from oneself. In this method, the objects of contemplation are obviously much broader than in the *Śrāvakayāna* method. As in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, all types of dharmas are employed to explain emptiness. When bodhisattvas awaken to the nature of the truth, this awakening is more thorough than that of the *Śrāvakas*. In other words, the object of contemplation in the *Śrāvakayāna* method, which is the four noble truths, has limits, whereas the *Mahāyāna*’s object, which covers the boundless universe, has no limits. This is why *Mahāyāna* practitioners can

¹⁰ Note here that the definition of “all dharmas” differs between the various vehicles. When the *Śrāvakayāna* talks about investigating all dharmas, this is referring to all the objects that give rise to consciousness, namely the six sense faculties (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind) and their corresponding sense objects (forms, sounds, aromas, tastes, textures, and mental objects) and the sense consciousnesses (eye consciousness, ear consciousness, and so on). Through these sense faculties, objects, and consciousnesses, sentient beings are able to experience and interact with the world around them. So, in terms of all dharmas, this is generally the scope that the *Śrāvakayāna* practice focuses on. When the *Mahāyāna* discusses all dharmas, the scope is much broader. It not only includes the sense faculties and so on but also things that the ordinary person cannot experience daily, such as the sublime buddha lands, the transcendental states of the great bodhisattvas, and the virtues of the *Mahāyāna* sages.

attain the ultimate goal of Buddhahood and become omniscient, whereas the *Śrāvakayāna* practitioner's attainment is only the realization of the truth.¹¹

Differences in Vows Lead to Differences in the Object of Contemplation

The Consciousness-only school says that intentions of *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners are strongly focused on leaving this world and are eager to gain liberation for themselves. Therefore, *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners contemplate on their own body and mind for the sake of realizing the truth of suffering, emptiness, and impermanence, which can end cyclic existence. On the contrary, the bodhisattvas of the *Mahāyāna* have great compassion, and in everything they do, their intention is to liberate sentient beings. Therefore, their wisdom of insight cannot be limited to only their own selves. Instead, it must revolve around all dharmas, and use all dharmas as the object of contemplation.¹²

Wisdom Practice of Mahāyāna Based on Worldly Phenomena and Transcendental Truth

In the *Mahāyāna* scriptures, there are different methods, and each emphasizes different aspects. Therefore, in terms of the exposition on the wisdom of insight, the texts focus on various aspects to differing degrees. Hence, unavoidably, some are detailed on certain aspects, while others are brief. Nevertheless, in summary, the teaching on the dual aspects of worldly phenomena and the transcendental truth is commonly found in the *Mahāyāna* texts.

In terms of investigating various aspects of dharmas, a practitioner's investigation begins with the fundamental concepts of cause and effect, wholesome and unwholesome, worldly beings and sages, past and future lives, and so on. Then they extend even further to include the body and minds of *Mahāyāna* sages and the countless sublime buddha lands. All these aspects of dharmas are the objects of contemplation that the *Mahāyāna* wisdom of insight should penetrate. [Among these aspects, some are the various situations on the *Mahāyāna* path, and some are the resultant virtues of the buddhas], all of which are very important teachings in the *Mahāyāna*. In terms of the situations on the path, these include the way in which practitioners initiate their bodhi mind at the start, then diligently engage in practice, gradually progress, and traverse eons of time before they perfect their practice and attain Buddhahood. This process highlights the bodhisattva's causal deeds. In terms of the resultant virtues attained by buddhas, these include countless unfathomable merits, such as the ability to appear in

¹¹ Here, the difference between omniscience and the realization of the truth lies in the breadth of wisdom. In the *Śrāvaka* practice, the realization of the truth relies on the four noble truths and is sufficient to bring one to liberation through the realization of emptiness, impermanence, and so on. Omniscience, however, includes not only the realization of the truth in order to gain liberation for oneself but also includes the skillful means of guiding sentient beings to liberation, all aspects of the universe, mind and phenomena, and so on. A common simile used to highlight the difference between the *Śrāvakayāna* awakening and the *Mahāyāna* awakening is the comparison between the space in a single pore and the space in the universe. In each, the essence of space is the same, but the quantum is vastly different.

¹² This paragraph provides the reason why bodhisattvas contemplate everything, as opposed to the *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners. The impetus is in their vows of compassion to liberate all beings, thus they must develop the wisdom that will enable that compassionate vow to be fulfilled.

myriad manifestations, expound many types of teachings, reveal the ultimate aspects of a buddha's body, and how sublime and marvelous the buddha lands are. The main subject matter of *Mahāyāna* texts revolves around the superior causal practices of bodhisattvas and the resultant perfect virtues of buddhas. These causal practices and resultant virtues are also the profound objects of contemplation in the *Mahāyāna* wisdom of insight. For those just starting to cultivate the bodhisattva practices, these [lofty] aspects are something to which they can only aspire. This means that, for the time being, these aspects are ideal goals, which motivate beginners to do all they can to practice [diligently] and attain these virtues. When true wisdom arises, this is the realization of the ultimate truth, and then, finally, there is the attainment of Buddhahood.

Realization of the Ultimate Truth

The realization of the ultimate truth centers on emptiness, which pervades all dharmas. The realization of the truth through the *Mahāyāna* wisdom has two key points of difference from the realization of the truth through *Śrāvakayāna* wisdom. First, the *Śrāvakayāna* teaching on attainment of awakening points to a progressive path using the three dharma seals; that is, by gradually awakening to impermanence, one achieves selflessness and finally nirvana. Conversely, the *Mahāyāna* teaching on the wisdom of insight reveals a direct path of awakening to cessation and emptiness of all dharmas. At the same time, this ultimate truth is the basis upon which the *Mahāyāna* teaching explains all dharmas and all their aspects [which are the objects of contemplation in the *Mahāyāna* wisdom of insight]. When the scriptures say that suffering and so on do not exist, such teachings are from the perspective of the ultimate truth. The *Mahāyāna* teaching clearly differs from the *Śrāvakayāna* teaching on the object of contemplation, which is based on impermanence as the entryway. In the *Mahāyāna* texts, based on the contemplation object that is realized, various terms for the truth have been established, for example, nature of all dharmas, truth, selflessness, emptiness, highest reality, neither arising nor ceasing, and *tathāgatagarbha*. In some *Mahāyāna* scriptures, the terms are combined to become “all dharmas are empty of real essence, no arising, no cessation, originally still, naturally in a state of nirvana.” Alternatively, some teachings say all sentient beings are endowed with the [true] nature of dharmas: it is permanent and lasting, and it is true and real. The *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* says that all dharmas are ultimately empty, that there is no real intrinsic nature. This explanation has the same meaning [regarding the ultimate nature of all dharmas].

Second, *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners focus on contemplating their own body and mind and seem to have less consideration for other external objects. Their contemplation merely needs to focus on their own body and mind to realize that there is no “I” and “mine.” This is sufficient for them to attain liberation. This is not the case in the *Mahāyāna*. In the sequence of practices in the *Madhyamaka* established by Nāgārjuna, although the last step to attain liberation relies on the contemplation of no “I” and “mine,” during the preceding stages, bodhisattvas are required to extensively contemplate the empty nature of all dharmas. Another example is the

Consciousness-only practitioners; they explain that the fundamental error is sentient beings' cognition of objects [apart from the mind] as external and real existing things, referred to as delusional phenomena of erroneous attachment. In their teaching, in the contemplation of consciousness only, the ultimate realization of the truth is to awaken to the emptiness of equality—that is, the state of accomplishment of perfection. However, before this realization of ultimate nature of consciousness only, the practitioners always contemplate the dharmas separate from the mind and realize that these dharmas are empty of intrinsic nature and merely projections of the mind. On account of realizing that there are no external and real existing things, Consciousness-only practitioners attain the state where there is no object and where their mind is still.

Progression in the Practice of Worldly Phenomena and Transcendental Truth

The objects of contemplation in the unique wisdom of the *Mahāyāna*—from the perspective of the various aspects of dharmas—include causes, conditions, and effects in this cyclic world of birth and death, and the manifestations of the body and mind. Apart from these objects, the bodhisattva's practices, the virtues attained upon Buddhahood, and so on are also included. Based on the understanding and confidence gained from the wisdom of conventional truth [through the contemplation of the aforementioned objects], one has to further contemplate the emptiness of all dharmas—that is, the selflessness of all dharmas. The purpose of this is to continuously develop the wisdom of learning, contemplation, and practice through insight into the ultimate truth. Eventually, one then realizes the empty nature of all dharmas—that is, the ultimate truth.

The value in cultivating the *Mahāyāna* wisdom is the resultant ability to penetrate the truth through phenomena and to attain the state of ultimate truth from the conventional. There is no longer a mismatch between phenomena and the truth, no longer an obstruction between the transcendental and conventional. Therefore, this perfect and ultimate wisdom of insight belonging to the *Mahāyāna* must have attained the highest state, where there is perfect harmony, coherence, and true equality between truth and phenomena. However, for beginners, this highest state is not attainable, because the minds of ordinary sentient beings cannot comprehend this object of contemplation.

Within the stages of the path, it is certainly not the case that Indian masters instruct practitioners to contemplate the coherence and perfect harmony of all dharmas when they first start on the path. Rather the teachings begin with understanding and confidence in dependent origination—that is, causes and effects [of all dharmas], the bodhisattva practices and vows, and the virtues of Buddhahood. From contemplating these objects, practitioners progress to understanding the truth and relying on the conventional to realize the truth. That is, they awaken to the emptiness of all dharmas, eliminate all delusional conceptualization, and attain the state of ultimate cessation. Next, the practitioners can further understand all dharmas based on their realization of the truth. They emerge from the state of awakening to the truth, and then

gradually the various aspects of dharmas and truth—that is, the transcendental truth and conventional truth—become harmonized.

Asaṅga likens the process of this path to the *vajra* weapon, which is wide at both ends and narrow in the middle. What this simile means is that from the start of our practice until just before attaining realization, the objects to be contemplated are innumerable and the practices countless. Then, just as we are about to attain realization, the only object [to be contemplated] is the truth. Then, when realization is attained, even the object of contemplation falls away. This process is called entrance to stillness with nonduality, or the one and only entrance. At this stage, the path is at its narrowest; there are no more objects of contemplation. Only via this entrance can we truly gain thorough awakening to emptiness. With this awakening, the wisdom of skillful means arises—derivative wisdom [of nondiscrimination], which can extensively contemplate countless objects and undertake myriad [wholesome] deeds. As the practice progresses, wisdom gradually becomes deeper until the attainment of Buddhahood, where there is harmony between phenomena and the truth, or coherence between the conventional and the transcendental.

In the Chinese Buddhist teachings, there are some teachings that instruct practitioners to directly contemplate the state of perfection and coherence from the start.¹³ This differs from the teachings of the Indian sages. The practice taught in the Chinese Buddhist Chan school [which similarly has no gradual stages] is simple and direct, with practical benefits to the body and mind. Compared with the aforementioned Chinese Buddhist teachings, this is better.¹⁴

In India, both the *Madhyamaka* school and the Consciousness-only school base their awakening on the realization of emptiness where there are no objects of contemplation. Only afterward, the practitioner gradually extends their scope of practice [to contemplate countless dharmas] and approach Buddhahood.

10. Progression in the Cultivation of Wisdom

Wisdom of Learning

Some people, in their previous lives, made great strides in the cultivation of wisdom; as a result, in this present life, they can attain realization upon hearing the Buddha-dharma for the first time. However, if we connect each life from past to present, to future, in a continuum, all practitioners have to go through several stages, from the initiation of the vow until the point of realization. That is to say, they have to develop the wisdoms of learning, contemplation and practice and then they can attain the realization of true wisdom (also called the realization of

¹³ This means to have no gradual progression and is possibly referring to the *Huayan* school.

¹⁴ Here the text is trying to express that the simplicity and practical benefits from the Chan school's teachings makes the Chan school relatively better than the other Chinese Buddhist teachings that instruct practitioners to directly contemplate the state of perfection.

[undefined] *samādhi*). It is not possible to skip the path of the three worldly wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice, and still attain realization.

In the *Śrāvakayāna* teachings, from the beginning to the awakened stages, there are the four factors for entry into Sagehood, which are “associating with spiritual guides, broad and repeated learning,¹⁵ reflecting on the dharma properly and thoroughly, practicing the noble eightfold path for the sake of nirvana.” This means that beginners learning the Buddha’s teachings should associate with spiritual guides and rely on the teachings of these guides to gradually cultivate the wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice.

The *Mahāyāna* teachings in this regard have the ten dharma practices: copying the *sūtras*, making offerings to the *sūtras*, gifting the *sūtras* to others, listening attentively, reading, bearing the teachings in mind, reciting, elaborating the *sūtras* to others, contemplating, and practicing. Of these practices, the first eight belong to the wisdom of learning, the ninth belongs to the wisdom of contemplation, and the tenth belongs to the wisdom of practice. Therefore, all of these practices fall within the scope of the three wisdoms.

It is obvious that the cultivation of the three worldly wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice is the essential path we must follow for practicing the Buddha-dharma. This is the definitive path followed by both the *Mahāyāna* and *Śrāvakayāna*. Even though the ultimate goal in the development of wisdom is to awaken to the true nature of all dharmas, from the aspect of the whole process of cultivation, it is unacceptable to ignore the foundations: the wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice. Therefore, when discussing the development of wisdom, it is obvious we must follow the proper process of the path to explain these three worldly wisdoms separately in their sequence. Hence, when discussing the three wisdoms, we should begin with the wisdom of learning.

Aspects and Ways to Practice the Wisdom of Learning

In the ancient times, the wisdom of learning was largely developed by listening to the Buddha’s sermons or to the teachings passed down by the Buddha’s disciples. Therefore, associating with spiritual guides became the first condition in the wisdom of learning. Subsequently, as different dharma teachings were compiled for propagation, those endowed with good capacity as a result of past learning could read and study the teachings themselves. By following the teachings of the scriptures, they could attain proper understanding, practice accordingly, and accomplish the wisdom of learning.

All that we learn from spiritual guides or the scriptures are the teachings from the Buddha, bodhisattvas, and great sages. As for how we should learn and practice the teachings, the scriptures provide a lot of guidance, such as listening attentively and seeking clarifications

¹⁵ This factor (broad and repeated learning) is sometimes presented as learning the righteous dharma (聽聞正法).

on doubts, or reading, memorizing, and writing out the teachings. We should adopt these various ways of learning and practicing in order to accomplish the wisdom of learning.

Generally, the wisdom of learning arises from listening to a teacher's instructions or from self-study of the scriptures. However, the most important point is that we must understand the underlying meaning of the Buddha-dharma. As explained above, the practice and attainment of wisdom includes the wisdom of the three vehicles and the unique wisdom of the *Mahāyāna*. The objects to be contemplated [by *Mahāyāna* practitioners] are extremely diverse, such as cause and effect, dependent co-arising, virtues of the buddhas, and vows and practices of the bodhisattvas, as well as the profound emptiness that reveals the truth of no intrinsic nature within all dharmas. All of these can be the objects of contemplation in the development of wisdom.

The wisdom of learning is the foundational stage in the development of wisdom, so, naturally, we should seek extensive learning and broad knowledge regarding the various characteristics of phenomena denoted by terms and different doctrines and their practices. Nevertheless, what Buddhism emphasizes is how to grasp the essence of the Buddha-dharma and penetrate the profound transcendental meaning while tirelessly undertaking broad learning. Therefore, according to the underlying meaning of the Buddha-dharma, extensive learning and broad knowledge does not equate to the wisdom of learning. Only when broad knowledge and extensive learning accord with the three dharma seals or the true dharma seal can they be regarded as the wisdom of learning. As the *Śrāvakayāna sūtras* teach, the ability to properly and carefully contemplate impermanence, selflessness, and nirvana is broad learning. The *Mahāyāna sūtras* say that broad learning is the ability to learn about the nature of cessation and the emptiness of all dharmas, or the nature of the truth. If we are unable to accord with the three dharma seals or the true dharma seal when practicing the Buddha-dharma, we have strayed from the essence of the Buddha-dharma, and we will not succeed in accomplishing the wisdom of learning.

The Wisdom of Learning Requires Proper Practice and Personal Experience

While learning about the countless terms denoting the characteristics of phenomena, we should bear in mind this important point [about being in accord with the three dharma seals] and apply it in all our bodily and mental activities to develop proper practices and attain personal experiences. This will then guide our mind state to gradually become pure and calm. If we can achieve this, we will then be able to initiate the wisdom of learning and truly gain the benefits of the Buddha-dharma. Although the wisdom of learning is the least profound and most simple foundational stage, it still requires diligent effort and duration of practice to accomplish.

The Wisdom of Learning's Position within the Four Factors for Entry into Sagehood and the Four Reliances

In the *Śrāvakayāna* teachings, the wisdom of learning is the factor of broad and repeated learning in the four factors for entry into Sagehood. If we consider the wisdom of learning from the perspective of the four reliances, we can see that it corresponds to the reliance on the meaning and not the literal words. This is because the aim of broad and repeated learning is to understand the underlying meaning of the scriptures rather than to focus on the accumulation of technical terms or the embellishment of ornate expressions.

Meaning of Broad and Repeated Learning

The following two points can help us understand the meaning of broad and repeated learning. First, because the Buddha-dharma is extremely vast and profound, and there are myriad aspects from which each dharma is understood, if we commit to practicing the *Mahāyāna*, we should have the lofty intention to fulfill the aspiration “dharma practices are boundless; I vow to learn them all.” That is, we should diligently listen and learn without tiring. Second, we should continually and diligently cultivate all kinds of practices so that we are well versed in all of them. With the continual development of repeated learning, we can then go deeper each time. Gradually, our inner mind will become pure and calm, and our ability to have deep understanding will germinate. When we gain a deep understanding, this is the attainment of the state where we comprehend the profound Buddha-dharma with dependence on terms that denote its meaning.

Broad and repeated learning is without a doubt the most important starting point in the development of wisdom. Everyone who is learning the Buddha-dharma should take this as their immediate goal and stride toward it!

Wisdom of Contemplation

To learn broadly and repeatedly until accomplishing the wisdom of learning is the first step in the cultivation of the Buddha-dharma. The next step is to apply contemplation and investigation to the Buddha-dharma that has been learned. The wisdom of contemplation no longer focuses on language-based wisdom from learning. Instead, it enters into the phase of investigating meaning.

The Wisdom of Contemplation's Position within the Four Factors for Entry into Sagehood and the Four Reliances

The wisdom of contemplation corresponds to the factor of contemplating the dharma properly and thoroughly in the four factors for entry into Sagehood. Regarding the four reliances, the wisdom of contemplation corresponds to reliance on the ultimate teachings and not the provisional teachings. In order for contemplation and investigation to conform to the truth, we should rely on the ultimate teachings and take these teachings as the yardstick when

analyzing the Buddha-dharma. Only then will the resultant investigative wisdom be correct. Otherwise, the conclusions from our contemplation will be biased or erroneous, and will never accord with the Buddha-dharma's true meaning.

The Principle for Investigating the True Meaning when Cultivating the Wisdom of Contemplation

Originally, the Buddha's teachings were one and the same in meaning and purpose. Subsequently, to cater to the countless grades of spiritual capacities of sentient beings in this world, it was necessary for the Buddha to present different teachings to suit the situations. Accordingly, the perfect teachings, originally being one and the same, exhibit the distinctions of ultimate and provisional teachings.

The principle for cultivating the wisdom of contemplation and investigating the doctrines is that we should take ultimate doctrines as the basis for understanding the meaning of provisional doctrines and not the other way around. This is because when investigating and discerning whether or not a teaching is ultimate, we must not use provisional teachings, which are not perfect, as the standard of measure [because to do so would bring about incorrect results]. For example, the Buddha usually teaches about selflessness. However, for the sake of guiding certain groups of sentient beings, sometimes he teaches there is a self as a skillful means. The teaching on selflessness is an ultimate doctrine that accords with the truth, whereas the teaching about a self is a provisional teaching that does not accord with the truth. When we investigate these two teachings to discern which one is the ultimate doctrine, we must rely on the teaching of selflessness as the principle to understand the Buddha's tact and intention behind the teaching on a self. We must not flip the situation around to take the teaching on a self as an ultimate doctrine and use it as the basis for understanding the teaching on selflessness. Otherwise, we would incorrectly interpret the teaching on selflessness as provisional or to mean that there is a self.

If we do not properly recognize the standard for ultimate and provisional teachings, but we want to investigate the Buddha-dharma to discern which are the true teachings, the conclusions we reach and the true doctrines of the Buddha-dharma will certainly be poles apart. Therefore, the contemplation and investigation of the Buddha-dharma must use the ultimate doctrines as the standard of measure. Only then will the resultant understanding avoid any distortions and errors.

The Boundary between Ultimate and Provisional Teachings

Where exactly is the boundary between the ultimate and provisional teachings? Generally [in relation to the ultimate goal], the *Śrāvakayāna* teachings belong to the provisional category, and the *Mahāyāna* teachings belong to the ultimate category. However, in the *Mahāyāna* texts, many of the guidelines that cater to various situations still have elements that are provisional. When the Buddha taught the dharma for the sake of encouraging

beings to have faith and practice, he would frequently praise that particular *sūtra*. Almost every *sūtra* contains descriptions to the effect that this teaching is “the king of all *sūtras*.” For the later disciples of the Buddha, it is not sufficient to merely rely on these sentences of praise in a *sūtra* as proof that a particular *sūtra* is ultimate and perfect and to then rely on this *sūtra* as the standard by which to conclude which teachings are ultimate or provisional.

Regarding the issue of which teachings can be relied upon as the standard, we may obtain some clarity by referring to the guidance of the renowned ancient sages. The ancient exegesis masters did not place much emphasis on the sections in a *sūtra* that are meant to encourage people to practice. Rather, they focused on reasoning based on the doctrines. Therefore, their explanations of the ultimate and provisional teachings can serve as the standard for us to follow. In India, there are two standards proposed by two main schools [of *Mahāyāna*].

One school, which includes Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva, takes the *Akṣayamati Sūtra*, *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, and so on as the standard to classify all the Buddha’s teachings. If the teachings are in accord with the principles of the emptiness of all dharmas, selflessness, no intrinsic nature, no arising or cessation, and still by nature, these teachings are classed as ultimate. If the teachings result in the understanding that there is intrinsic nature, that something is not empty, and that there is a self, these teachings are classed as provisional. This school grounds itself in the conviction and uses it to both investigate the doctrines and explain the path of practice. The ways of investigation and explanations of this school possess a cohesive quality and is unique among all Buddhist philosophies. Even when they describe the state of awakening to the truth, they apply the doctrine that there is absolutely no intrinsic nature to denote the ultimate realization attained by true wisdom. These are the key characteristics of *Madhyamaka* thought that developed into a main school of *Mahāyāna*.

The other major school, which includes Asaṅga and Vasubandhu and their lineage, uses the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* and the like as their standard. Adherents of this school are convinced that as long as a teaching explains all dharmas based on the three types of existent states, the teaching belongs to the ultimate category. According to their conviction, “delusional phenomena of erroneous attachment” are nonexistent, whereas the “phenomena dependent on causes and conditions” do exist. Similarly, the “state of accomplishment of perfection” also exists. If a teaching states that all dharmas are empty and does not make exceptions for phenomena dependent on causes and conditions and the state of accomplishment of perfection to be existent, that particular teaching is classed as provisional. This school believes that the three types of existent states are the standard for classifying all Buddha-dharma and investigating the doctrines. It became a major school of thought in the *Mahāyāna*, called the Consciousness-only school. The method of practice differs from that of the *Madhyamaka* school. It describes the state of awakening as the ultimate existence, which is attained with the realization of the dual emptiness, [that is, no attachment to either subject or object].

It is difficult to come to a definitive conclusion by purely using the scriptures to determine what is ultimate and provisional [because each text claims to be the ultimate teaching]. Nevertheless, when investigating which are the ultimate teachings, we can adopt, as our basis, the guidelines introduced by the ancient masters. Regardless of which [major school we examine], be it the *Madhyamaka* school or the Consciousness-only school from India, or even the traditional Chinese lineages that take the *Śūramgama Sūtra* and the *Treatise on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* as ultimate teachings, each of these schools is meticulous and careful in its categorization of the scriptures, and each has cohesive ways of reasoning. There is no harm in us adopting their good aspects and forgoing their distorted biases. In other words, mutually investigating and validating [the methods from various schools] and finding ways to explain these differences is a way to ascertain a reasonable reference point for investigation. In doing so, we can accomplish the astute, beneficial, and righteous wisdom of contemplation.

Wisdom of Practice

In the process of cultivating the three wisdoms, both the wisdom of contemplation and the wisdom of practice involve the discernment and investigation of all dharmas. The difference between the two lies in whether or not the practitioner undertakes discernment and investigation with a mind that is in concentration. When cultivating the wisdom of contemplation, the mind is not aligned with concentration (although the practitioner may practice meditation). When cultivating the wisdom of practice, the mind is concentrated.

Contemplation is also literally translated as “mental actions” [based on Sanskrit], which was originally a synonym for “reflection on.” Prior to attaining concentration, when the mind is yet to accord with the concentrated state, any activities of discernment and investigation are carried out with a mind that has some degree of focus but is not yet at the state of concentration, and this is called the wisdom of contemplation. When the mind attains concentration and in that state is able to investigate and discern the truth of all dharmas, this is called the wisdom of practice.

Though the Mind has Clarity, This is Not the Wisdom of Insight

When the mind is able to maintain singular focus on an object, whether it is a worldly object or the transcendental truth, this is the mark of tranquility. When tranquility arises, the mind has great clarity toward all dharmas, but this is not the wisdom of insight. Rather, it is the typical mental ability that comes with tranquility and concentration. After the practice of tranquility is accomplished, the next step is to contemplate the aspects of conventional phenomena, such as cause and effect, dependent co-arising, and even the Buddha’s magnificent hallmarks. Alternatively, a practitioner can contemplate the transcendental truth that all dharmas are selfless and originally still. At this point, not only is the mind in a state of deep stillness and clarity, but it is also able to properly contemplate, investigate, and experience the truth of all dharmas while in this state of clarity and stillness. To be able to conduct

investigations while in the state of tranquility is the accomplishment of the wisdom of practice. This was the instruction by Buddha [on the process of cultivating wisdom of practice] when he gave the teaching on tranquility and insight to Maitreya Bodhisattva and others.

Wisdom of Practice Cannot Directly Bring Forth Realization, but It Is a Necessary Stage in Order to Attain Realization

Merely focusing on the aspects of conventional phenomena to accomplish concentration is not enough to propel us toward realization. Only with further investigation of selflessness and the ultimate emptiness of all dharmas can the wisdom of practice initiate the pure and true wisdom of realization.¹⁶ Although the wisdom of practice cannot directly bring forth realization, it is a necessary stage in order to attain realization.

Within the four reliances, the reliance on wisdom and not discursive knowledge is the guiding criterion for the wisdom of practice. Discursive knowledge possesses defilements and attachments. It is a delusional differentiation based on the notions of “I” and “mine.” If a practitioner relies on discursive knowledge to continue their practice, not only will they be unable to gain realization and liberation but they will also face obstructions on the way to realization and liberation. Wisdom is the complete opposite because it possesses the capacity to break through self-attachment and eliminate erroneous views. The insight that there is no differentiation and no intrinsic nature can tame the defilements in our minds and initiate the wisdom of true realization.

11. Accomplishing the Cultivation of Wisdom

Accomplishing the Fruition of Faith, Morality, Concentration, and Wisdom

The cultivation of wisdom and the cultivation of all other pure virtues are mutually aligned and mutually enhancing. It is not true that we can forgo all the other boundless practices and vows and still accomplish wisdom. Therefore, strictly speaking, the accomplishment of wisdom also relies on the practice and cultivation of other virtues, and, vice versa, all the other boundless virtues are able to develop and become perfect on account of wisdom. During the proper process of practice and realization, all the pure virtues and wisdom are mutually related and mutually encompassing. They rely on each other to progress. In the *Mahāyāna sūtras*, it is taught that the six *pāramitās* are supportive of one another, and mutually develop and advance. In the *Śrāvakayāna* teachings, there are the five roots—faith, diligence, recollection,

¹⁶ In the original Chinese text, the term 有漏 (meaning “defiled”) is paired with the wisdom of practice, while the term 無漏 (meaning “undefiled”) is used to describe the true wisdom of realization. To avoid confusing the reader, these adjectives have been omitted in the English version. In Chinese, when the word “defiled” is used to modify wisdom it indicates that the practitioner has not yet cut off all afflictions and, as such, is still within the cycle of life and death.

concentration, and wisdom—and each depends on the others for its accomplishment. All these teachings explain how wisdom and other virtues are aligned and inseparable.

Three Wisdoms and the Virtues That Arise with Them

The three worldly wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice are the necessary cultivations that can bring us to the transcendental wisdom of true realization. They comprise the three stages in the whole cultivation of wisdom. When each stage is accomplished, the corresponding pure virtues arise accordingly. Now let us briefly look at these virtues according to the stages (focusing on the primary virtues in each stage).

First is the accomplishment of the wisdom of learning. This is when right views and the foundation of faith are both established.¹⁷ Beginners on the path, through the process of broad and repeated learning, delve deep into the Buddha-dharma and accomplish the wisdom of learning. Because they can properly understand the triple gem and the noble doctrines relating to the truth¹⁸ and hold right views, their faith in the triple gem and noble doctrines becomes strong and unwavering. When Buddhist practitioners accomplish the wisdom of learning or become equipped with the foundation of faith, even if they are tormented by defamation, threats, and attacks, their faith will not waver in the slightest. Even if they find themselves in the age of the dharma's deterioration or in a place where Buddhism is in decline and where no one believes in Buddhism, they will be able to keep their faith and practice on their own. When we truly immerse ourselves deep in the Buddha-dharma and are equipped with right views, our faith in the Buddha-dharma is not determined by the faith of those around us or by the popularity of Buddhism. In the cultivation of wisdom, the first step is to develop right views and deep faith, to such an extent that our faith is steadfast. This enables us to move forward courageously and never retreat, no matter the benefit or harm, gain or loss we may face.

Second is the accomplishment of the wisdom of contemplation. This also signifies the perfection of pure precepts. According to the *Mahāyāna* teachings, this stage is also where the virtues of compassion, generosity, tolerance, diligence, and so on are accomplished. In our cultivation of the Buddha-dharma, having right faith and right understanding (views) is but the first stage of accomplishment. Next, we have to apply them. That means we apply what we have faith in and understand so that the behaviors of our every action and thought comply with the righteous path of the Buddha-dharma. The wisdom of contemplation is the stage when all that we have learned, that we have faith in, and that we understand are converted into real actions. Even though the nature of this wisdom is to discern and investigate, it is not merely an activity that occurs in the mind. Rather, it is able to begin influencing our actions and speech,

¹⁷ There are varying levels of right view and faith. Here, “established” is referring to the initial level, which is still not at the level of the sages.

¹⁸ Understanding the noble doctrines relating to the truth properly means that the practitioner's understanding aligns with the three dharma seals or the one dharma seal (see section 9: Object of Contemplation for Insight Meditation).

which can guide our behavior onto the right path. In the Buddhist teaching of the noble eightfold path, the first two are right view and right intentions. These are followed by right speech, actions, and livelihood. This tells us that when we have the right intentions (accomplishment of the wisdom of contemplation), all our actions and speech—even our economic livelihood and so on—will fall within the right tracks of the Buddha-dharma. This is the virtue of perfect precepts, which is brought about by accomplishing the wisdom of contemplation. In addition, for *Mahāyāna* practitioners, their practice of pure precepts is always aligned with a mind of compassion. Within the pure precepts, they are able to nurture their compassion. Likewise, only when the mind is fully equipped with compassion can we perfectly accomplish the pure *Mahāyāna* precepts. A compassionate mind and the practice of upholding pure precepts have a very close relationship.

The establishment of precepts in Buddhism essentially has two aspects. One is the more negative aspect of prohibiting and preventing unwholesome behavior. The other is the positive aspect of benefiting others and society. Ultimately, the intention and aim of establishing the precepts was none other than to benefit oneself and others. In terms of benefiting oneself, this takes the form of taming our defilements and stopping them from arising. Accordingly, we gain purity in actions and thoughts. In terms of benefiting others, this takes the form of realizing that sentient beings are constantly suffering and in torment; therefore, we cannot bear to create more harm. The first step is to apply the precepts and abstain from doing things that harm others. This is the manifestation of the negative aspect of prohibition. Next is that we further develop this aspect into the compassionate practices of bringing benefit and happiness to sentient beings. This is to accomplish the *Mahāyāna* compassion. Therefore, when bodhisattvas take the precepts, they not only abstain from unwholesome actions for their own purification but they also simultaneously focus on the positive actions that benefit sentient beings. Therefore, the *Mahāyāna* virtues of generosity, tolerance, diligence, and so on all arise with the accomplishment of pure precepts.

Third is the accomplishment of the wisdom of practice. To accomplish this wisdom, we must begin with the discernment and investigation that are carried out with a mind that has yet to attain concentration. When discernment and investigation are carried out in alignment with a mind in concentration, this is called the wisdom of practice. Therefore, possessing the wisdom of practice indicates the attainment of right concentration—that is, the accomplishment of concentration. After attaining the wisdom of practice, we must continuously endeavor to progress [on the path]. When true wisdom arises—accomplishing the wisdom of true realization—we are able to cease all defilements and end the cycle of life and death. This is the accomplishment of the virtue of liberation.

In an earlier section, four ultimate aspects of true and perfect wisdom are discussed:¹⁹

¹⁹ See section 7: The Ultimate Characteristics of Wisdom.

1. Faith and wisdom function as one.
2. Compassion and wisdom merge.
3. Tranquility and wisdom are in balance.
4. The sameness of truth and wisdom is realized.

These aspects become partially realized as the *Mahāyāna* wisdom is attained. For example, when the wisdom of learning is accomplished, this encompasses attaining the foundation of faith. In this stage, we have no doubts whatsoever about the triple gem and the noble doctrines relating to the truth. This is indeed the manifestation where faith and wisdom function as one. Next, when the wisdom of contemplation is accomplished, on account of the simultaneous accomplishment of the pure precepts, a deep and earnest vow of compassion is initiated. This becomes the wisdom unique to the *Mahāyāna*, where compassion and wisdom merge. Third, when the wisdom of practice is accomplished, it must be aligned with a mind that has attained concentration. This is the aspect where tranquility and wisdom are in balance. Last, when true wisdom is accomplished, the state where there is true wisdom to awaken to the truth is attained. At this point, there is no difference between true wisdom and the truth.²⁰ This is the highest state, where the sameness of truth and wisdom is realized. Once this stage is reached, all four aspects of true wisdom are perfectly attained.

Conclusion

It is clear that when the cultivation of wisdom is accomplished, the corresponding virtues are present. Similarly, all virtues need wisdom so that they can be perfected. If we want to attain deep, profound, and true wisdom but ignore [the virtues of] faith, precepts, compassion, and concentration [and so on], we will not succeed. It is just fanciful thinking. Nāgārjuna said, “If one aspires to realize emptiness but has no virtues of faith and no precepts as a foundation, their practice on emptiness is erroneous.” If the practice of emptiness does not align with the virtues of faith and precepts, one will fall into an evil pit and never attain liberation. This erroneous situation was definitely pointed out by Venerable Taixu in the past. In summary, the situation where one wants to develop wisdom but discards the numerous pure virtues is not in accord with either the *Śrāvakayāna* practice or the *Mahāyāna* practice.

The Function of Precepts Is to “Get Involved with and Help Society”

In the process of developing wisdom, for most practitioners, the primary focus is on how to attain the state where realization of the transcendental truth is not separated from worldly phenomena. This is referred to as coherence between the conventional and the transcendental, or the harmony between phenomena and truth, or the nonobstruction between truth and phenomena. In other words, a key concern is how to merge ordinary daily life and

²⁰ This state is conventionally described in terms of the duality of subject and object, where the subject is the wisdom that can bring about realization, and the object is the truth that is to be realized. However, when practitioners experience this state—where true wisdom awakens to the truth—they actually transcend duality. Hence, there is no difference between the two.

the ultimate transcendental truth so that they are as one. However, in the early stages of attaining true wisdom, the realization unavoidably has more focus on the true nature of all dharmas [and less on their various aspects]. Therefore, after the initial true realization that all dharmas are empty by nature, we still need to continue our practice. The aim is to apply the truth that we realize to the investigation of all aspects of phenomena. Only then can we apply the realization of the truth to understanding the world so that we can be free from attachments and depart from erroneous perceptions that are deep and firm. Finally, we can attain the state where there is perfect harmony and coherence between truth and phenomena. In this way, the realization of the truth and the worldly undertakings—that is, our everyday lives and the truth—are always in alignment.

Attention to the Expansion of Wisdom

It is true we need to understand that the primary focus is to realize the state where the transcendental truth and worldly phenomena are not separate. However, in the *Mahāyāna* cultivation of wisdom, we also have to attend to the expansion of wisdom. Although the three wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice are yet to be accomplished, we should learn all sorts of worldly skills and subjects of benefit to our lives and society. Of course, if the quality²¹ of the Buddhist cultivation of learning, contemplation, and practice does not form the basis for learning these skills and subjects, they will merely remain as worldly knowledge and unrelated to the Buddhist practice. Essentially, a bodhisattva's vow is to guide sentient beings; this is the bodhisattva's main task. This must be based on a strong, all-encompassing vow to acquire all types of wholesome and useful knowledge, as well as to learn the innumerable worldly and transcendental dharma practices. Therefore, in the early stages of the path, bodhisattvas should undertake learning, contemplation, and practice. However, they should also seek understanding regarding different fields of interest as best as they can.

The *Mahāyāna* scriptures point out that “bodhisattvas should study the five subjects.” The reason for this is that among the five subjects—apart from the subject of religion (Buddhism, including the three-vehicle path), which is the fundamental subject that bodhisattvas should learn—the subjects of medicine, crafts and trades, logic and reasoning, and linguistics can assist with the propagation of the Buddha-dharma. These subject areas are beneficial to society and people's lives. Because a bodhisattva aims to both protect and uphold the Buddha-dharma and to benefit sentient beings, it is naturally compulsory to learn these subjects. If prior to believing in Buddhism or attaining the Buddha's wisdom, a person has extensive learning and knowledge such that they are proficient in many worldly subjects, when they follow the Buddhist teachings and attain awakening, they are able to teach the dharma without any difficulty and can guide innumerable sentient beings. For example, Śāriputra was a learned and well-known spiritual practitioner before he became a Buddhist. Therefore, after

²¹ “Quality” is referring to the way in which the Buddhist three wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice must accord with the three dharma seals or the true dharma seal.

he converted to Buddhism and attained the fruition of an arhat, he then became recognized as the foremost sage on wisdom.

When one attains the state where nothing is obtainable—that is, at the point where one awakens to the true nature of dharmas and departs from erroneous perceptions—it seems that all kinds of worldly knowledge acquired during the process of cultivation are the accumulated residue from delusion and discrimination. However, if practitioners can progress through this phase, their worldly knowledge becomes the great tool that bodhisattvas can use to provide relief to the world and help sentient beings. After attaining awakening, it is even more important for bodhisattvas to learn worldly subjects and apply them in conjunction with the Buddha-dharma so that they harmoniously merge worldly learning with the Buddha-dharma. Bodhisattvas possess not only the wisdom of the paths; they also possess the wisdom of the aspects of the paths. This point is commonly overlooked by Buddhists in the present time.

True cultivation of wisdom in the *Mahāyāna* emphasizes the coherence between the investigated object and daily life—that is, the harmonization of the truth and the various aspects of phenomena. However, it also emphasizes the ability to extensively understand worldly subjects and to encompass countless marvelous wholesome practices so that all worldly learning aligns with the transcendental practices of Buddhism and becomes the skillful methods that one applies in order to benefit sentient beings. (Recorded by Changjue)