GRADUAL CULTIVATION AND SUDDEN ENLIGHTENMENT

“It may seem that gradual cultivation and sudden enlightenment are very different methods, but in fact they are interrelated and even complementary practices.”

Different Paths to Buddhahood

What does gradual cultivation mean? It means starting as an ordinary being, one follows the Buddhist practice step by step, progressing to higher and higher levels of enlightenment until one becomes a buddha. It is like going to school, one begins with elementary school, continuing on through high school and college until one finally earns a doctoral degree. In Buddhism, the process of perfecting all virtues in stages in order to attain Buddhahood is known as gradual cultivation.

What is sudden enlightenment? It means to directly awaken oneself to this present mind, this very awareness, this bodhi mind, which is originally pure. In short, it is realizing that this very mind is the buddha; this very mind is the Way.
Having attained this realization, we continue to maintain this bodhi mind, living our life from this enlightened perspective and understanding until we achieve perfection. Day or night, in stillness or activity, the mind is free from clinging and delusion, always lucid, mindful, and in command. Maintaining this bodhi mind, the awakened mind, to be always in an enlightened state until buddhahood is the practice of sudden enlightenment.

Once we are awakened to this present mind, we will realize that this very mind is “true suchness,” the profound bodhi mind, and the wisdom mind of the buddha. And, we also realize that everyone has this bodhi mind, or buddha nature; everyone can become a bodhisattva, a buddha. Thus, we truly see how precious and real we are, how all beings in this world are endowed with infinite hope and infinite life.

In gradual cultivation one gains understanding of the fundamental truth by gradually perfecting one’s actions with various Buddhist practices. In sudden enlightenment one is directly awakened to the fundamental truth first, then, with that realization, perfects one’s actions. If we do not yet have the chance or causal conditions for sudden enlightenment, then we can always practice gradual cultivation. It may seem that gradual
cultivation and sudden enlightenment are very different methods, but in fact they are interrelated and even complementary practices.

**Relative and Absolute Truths**

The Dharma, or the Buddha’s teaching, is the truth of life; it is also the ultimate truth. While there is only one ultimate truth, there are many kinds of conventional truth, such as family ethics, school regulations, and social rules. These principles are true by conventions; therefore, they are relative and will change with time and space. The Dharma, however, is always valid over time and space; it is the pinnacle of all truths, wherein the principles of gradual cultivation and sudden enlightenment are the quintessence of Buddhist truths.

Worldly laws or truths change because they are dependent on conditions. For example, what is considered good and correct in the United States may not be so in Mainland China or Taiwan. This is because the lifestyles, cultures, and histories in these places are all different. In some countries, a husband can lawfully have several wives, while in most other countries monogamy is the law. Therefore, at different places, in different times and
under different conditions, worldly conventions and truths change—they are all relative.

The truth that we talk about today—that everyone has this present mind, the bodhi mind, regardless of one’s race, age, or gender—does not change with time and space. Everywhere in the world, everyone in the past, present, or future has this mind. It is the absolute truth. The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch states: “In space there are the directions of east, west, north, and south; people may be rich, poor, noble, or common, but this bodhi mind, this awareness that everyone has, is neither from the east, west, north, nor south; neither rich, poor, noble, nor common; neither male, female, old, nor young.” Because everyone has the bodhi mind, this awareness, everyone can feel joy and pain; everyone wants to be happy and avoid suffering; moreover, everyone can be a bodhisattva or a buddha. Also because of this, we should cherish and take care of ourselves and respect and care for the lives of others.

Although we all have this awareness, this bodhi mind, each of us manifests it with different levels of wisdom and compassion. However, it doesn’t mean that the wiser have more inherent awareness than do others; it just means that their minds are more lucid and under-
standing, and that they are less discriminative and have fewer afflictions and delusions. On the other hand, those who lack wisdom have more afflictions, false views, and attachments that delude their minds. So we should understand that this inherent awareness is the same in everyone, but each has varying degrees of ignorance and afflictions that affect one’s levels of understanding, wealth, and even longevity. To manifest the light of awareness, and attain the highest quality of life, we need to study and practice the Dharma diligently.

The Four Levels of Attainment

There are four kinds of Buddhist saints, four levels of attainment leading to ultimate enlightenment. The first is arhats, whose wisdom and merit surpass those of ordinary beings. The next level up is pratyekabuddhas.

Surpassing both arhats and pratyekabuddhas in merit and wisdom are bodhisattvas, who practice to remove their “dharma ignorance” while guiding sentient beings to liberation.

Finally, the highest attainment is that of buddhas, who have eradicated all three kinds of afflictions and thereby reached unsurpassed complete enlightenment.
What does it mean to be a Buddhist saint, an enlightened being? It means purifying the mundane mind—this very mind that is now listening to the lecture—of the various afflictions and delusions; and when it is completely rid of all afflictions, then this mind will be exactly the same as a buddha’s mind.

But, how do we do so? In general, there are two paths to buddhahood: gradual cultivation and sudden enlightenment.

The Path of Gradual Cultivation

One gradual cultivation path is the practice of the six paramitas—perfection of charity, moral conduct, tolerance, diligence, meditation, and prajna wisdom. This is the path of bodhisattvas, which requires one to fulfill both a time requirement and the necessary merits to complete.

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1 Three afflictions (三惑): (1) False views and thoughts (見思惑), which hinder nirvana. They prevent one from seeing emptiness and attaining nirvana. (2) Dharma ignorance (塵沙惑), which hinders the bodhisattva way. It is the hindrance to understanding the true nature of all phenomena, so one does not have the skillful means to lead sentient beings to liberation. (3) Fundamental ignorance (無明惑), which hinders the middle way. It is the subtlest ignorance that prevents one from fully realizing the ultimate reality.
In terms of time, it takes a bodhisattva three asamkheya kalpas to perfect the six paramitas. Like going to school, it takes so many years to complete elementary school, high school, college, and graduate school in order to achieve a doctorate degree. Yet, how long exactly is three asamkheya kalpas? A kalpa is such a long period of time that we cannot measure it in terms of days, months, or years, but in terms of the time it takes for the universe to complete a cycle of formation and destruction. The scriptures give an analogy of how long this time is. Suppose there is a huge stone that is 40 miles long, 40 miles wide, and 40 miles high. A celestial being comes once every hundred years and rubs the stone once with a heavenly fabric lighter than feather and softer than silk. The time it takes for this stone to be completely rubbed away by this process is how long a small kalpa is. And it takes “countless” kalpas to make one “asamkheya” kalpa and three asamkheya kalpas for a bodhisattva to complete the bodhisattva path through the perfection of the six paramitas.

Perfection of Charity

Charity is the first of the six paramitas. How does one perfect this paramita? Contrary to what some may
think, it is not by donating a million or even a billion dollars but by our willingness to give everything we own, even our own body and life, altruistically and selflessly to benefit others. Shakyamuni Buddha began his bodhisattva path with the practice of giving. In order to save a dove, he cut off his own flesh to feed an eagle; he fed himself to hungry tigers so they wouldn’t starve to death. He was willing to give his own body to save others.

In a previous lifetime, when the Buddha was a prince, his country suffered a drought and people had nothing to eat. Seeing this, he gave all the treasures and food in the palace to the people. His father, the king, tried to stop the prince, “If you continue giving like this, there’ll be nothing left in the palace and our reign will come to an end!” So he expelled the prince. Even then, exiled and owning nothing, the prince still wanted to give. He remembered that the dragon king of the ocean had a mani pearl, which can fulfill all of one’s wishes. He tried many ways to obtain the mani pearl from the dragon king but failed. In desperation, he set forth to empty the ocean water. Drawing the water with buckets day after day, he finally fainted from exhaustion. His sincerity deeply touched the Four Heavenly Kings who then proceeded to help him. With their powers they emptied half of the ocean in a short period of time. The dragon
king, startled and also moved by the prince, decided to give the mani pearl to the prince. This is an example of being selfless in perfecting the charity paramita, and to complete this and the other five paramitas will take three asamkheya kalpas.

In addition, another hundred small kalpas are needed to perfect the thirty-two good marks and eighty fine attributes of a buddha. The sutras say that every buddha possesses these good marks and fine attributes. An example is “brahma-sound,” which means that when a buddha speaks, people of all different tongues are able to understand him—Taiwanese-, Japanese-, English-speaking people and even animals are able to understand his words without any translation. This is called “language samadhi.” Another good mark of a buddha is that anything he eats always tastes excellent like sweet ambrosia, unlike us who have to season our food for it to taste good.

It takes great merits to achieve each of these marks and attributes. We consider deeds such as building a temple or saving a life to be of great merit, but these are still far from the deeds that the Buddha had accomplished on his bodhisattva path. The scripture gives an example of the kind of merits needed to attain one of
these marks of a buddha: if everyone in the world were sick and dying, curing each one of them would be a great merit. Fulfilling one hundred such great merits results in one of these thirty-two marks. We can see that indeed, it is not easy to do these great deeds, to complete the six paramitas, to cultivate merits for three asamkheya kalpas, and finally to become a buddha!

**The Method of Sudden Enlightenment**

Since gradual cultivation takes such a long time, the Buddha taught us another method—“sudden awakening to the original mind and directly realizing buddhahood.” This is the method of sudden enlightenment, which doesn’t take three asamkheya kalpas. It is similar to the way the educational system operates—normally one starts from elementary school and gradually reaches college, but some smart students can skip grades and go directly to college.

Having compared gradual cultivation to sudden enlightenment, I believe all of you would want to practice the method of sudden enlightenment! The Buddha had endured innumerable hardships and did not want us to go through the same thing; therefore, he taught
us this direct method. And this is what we teach in the Chan-seven meditation retreat; in seven days, we can each learn how to awaken the mind and see our true nature; seeing our true nature, we become buddhas.

The Four Stages of Thought

A sutra states: “Not giving rise to a mind of defilement is the way to supreme enlightenment.” That is, the ordinary mind is the bodhi mind. Everyone has a mind, but each with different thoughts and mental states. So, exactly which is the buddha’s mind?

For example, when you are thirsty, the thought of wanting to drink tea arises. When you see a cup of tea, the thought of picking up the cup arises, and when you take a sip, the thought of picking up the cup has ceased and it is the thought of drinking that is in your mind. When taking the first sip, the thought, “this tastes great!” arises. When you take the second sip, the tea becomes less enjoyable; and when you take the third sip, the tea tastes plain and you don’t want to drink it anymore. By this time the thought of drinking tea has ceased. Then you see a cookie in front of you and another thought arises, “I want to eat this cookie.” In such a brief time,
so many thoughts have gone through the four stages of arising, abiding, changing, and ceasing. So how many thoughts occur from morning till night? How many thoughts come and go, how many mental states change and which of these is the buddha’s mind?

From morning till night, our mind is always going somewhere; thoughts follow one another endlessly. Some of them are good thoughts, some bad, and some random; they are like the waves of the ocean, always coming and going; or like bubbles that break and form again and again. Throughout the day our mind never rests, and even during the night it is busy dreaming. A sutra says that each day and night, 840 million thoughts go by. In fact, each thought is like a dream. When we say “life is like a dream,” it is not a mere metaphor; we are literally living in dreams. Every day we dream about new cars, dancing, or playing poker; we dream about money, lust, or power. Since we are always dreaming during the day, even when we should be resting at night, our minds continue to cling to the day’s events in our dreams. And when the mind is not dreaming, it is sleepy or muddled. So we see that half of our life is spent on sleeping and the other half is spent on dreaming—in Buddhism, deluded thoughts and drowsiness are serious afflictions indicating a mind not in command of itself.
The ordinary person’s mind is always in cycles of birth and death. Since each of our thoughts goes through the stages of arising, abiding, changing, and ceasing, sentient beings must experience birth, aging, illness, and death. Since sentient beings go through the stages of birth, aging, illness, and death, the world goes through the stages of formation, abiding, dissolution, and voidness.

This earth is in the abiding stage now, but it is aging everyday, and one day it will perish. Likewise, the universe will also crumble into voidness. To free oneself from the agony of endless cycles of birth, aging, illness, and death, the mind must be free from arising, abiding, changing, and ceasing. To transcend these four stages of thought, we must realize the bodhi mind, our original mind. The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch states: “Without realizing the original mind, it is futile to study the Dharma.” If we don’t know that the aim of our Buddhist practice is to realize the bodhi mind, then we are merely pursuing blessings that, although pleasant, are

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For example, to want to drink tea is “arising”; taking the cup and getting ready to drink is “abiding”; having different feelings toward the tea in your mouth is “changing”; and not wanting to drink anymore is “ceasing.”
nevertheless impermanent. This will not help us toward attaining enlightenment. All Dharma gates or methods are expedient means to help us realize the original, unborn and undying mind.

So, what is enlightenment? It is the realization of our bodhi mind, which is this very mind that is listening to this lecture now. But where is this mind?

**Functions of the Mind**

We can understand this true mind from three different perspectives: its essence, its attributes, and its functions. The mind’s essence is great, its attributes are great, and its functions are great too. How great is our mind? Everything in the past, present, and future is contained in this mind. The entire cosmos, all space and time are within our mind. This mind is infinite, has no boundaries, knows no distance, and can function near or far.

For example, when soldiers go to war, their family members back home must be very worried and think about their husbands or fathers, sons or daughters who are fighting in the war day after day. One night a wife may dream that her husband at war is sick, so she calls and finds out that he is indeed sick. Why is this? It is
because the mind knows no distance. No matter how far apart, whether separated by mountains or oceans, minds can still reach each other. Many examples like the above can be found in daily life.

When the mind is constantly thinking about something, it can reach a certain level of concentration that can be powerful enough to overcome physical boundaries. We sleep in a small bed but the mind can dream of mountains, oceans, and vast space beyond our small room. Also, a blind person can learn to walk smoothly using a walking stick, and there are artists with disabilities who can create fine works. These are examples of the different functions of the mind, especially showing what the mind can do when it is focused. This mind is very profound and subtle. People are used to using their eyes to look outward and their ears to listen to external sounds. If we can learn to look inward and listen within, we will be able to attain peace and tranquility very quickly.

Once there was a man who had severe arthritis and had been bedridden for over eight years. One day, the house suddenly caught fire and everyone in the house grabbed their precious belongings and escaped outside. After the house had burned down, they sud-
denly remembered that the sick man was still inside the house. Surely he was killed! Everyone felt very sorry and mourned for him. Suddenly, they heard the man yelling from a hill asking them to carry him down. Surprised, they asked him how he got up there in the first place. He said that when he saw the fire, he panicked, got out of bed, and ran up the hill! They said, “If you could run up, you can come down the same way.” He replied, “But my arthritis hurts so badly that I cannot move!”

From this example, it is clear that the mind is very powerful if we learn to harness it. When this mind is focused, calm and still, it may then manifest its inconceivable potential and functions. The Dharma teaches us how to use our mind, and in order to properly use this mind, we need to awaken it. Once the mind is awakened, we continue to maintain this state to purge all afflictions, purify every thought, and finally return to the state of no-thought in which the mind is neither arising nor ceasing—that is also the original state of this very mind.

This mind is right here, everywhere and ever-present. A great Chan master said that in the eyes, it is seeing; in the ears, it is hearing; in the nose, you can smell fragrance; in the tongue, you can detect sweetness, sourness, and all the flavors; in the hands you can grasp
things, and in the feet you can walk. These are all functions of the mind.

**Purity of the Mind**

Everyone has this inherently pure mind, but as unenlightened beings, our mind is full of delusions and attachments. When we use our eyes to look at the outside world, we start to discriminate the good and the bad, giving rise to various afflictions. When our ears hear others praising us, we become overjoyed, and when others criticize us, we become angry. So when afflictions arise from the use of our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and consciousness, our mind is like a pool of muddy water, unable to manifest great power and function wisely.

On the other hand, if we constantly reflect inwards to examine ourselves—when our eyes see things, we do not cling to them; when receiving praise, we are not overjoyed; when slandered, we do not get upset—then at all times our mind will be calm, clear and peaceful; as stated in the *Diamond Sutra*: “The mind should act without any attachments.” When our six senses (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and consciousness) are in contact with the six sense objects (form, sound, smell, taste,
touch, and dharmas), we know what is right or wrong, what is good or bad, and yet the mind is not tainted; it does not cling to either side. When our mind always maintains this “knowing” without craving, our senses gradually revert to purity. In this state, our mind will be like still water or an unblemished mirror, reflecting everything just as it is; we can then really access and make use of the inconceivable potential and functions of our mind; we can even radiate light and move the earth.

A Chan master once described the Chan practice:

Walking through a field of flowers,
Yet not letting even a single leaf cling to you.

What does this mean? It means that everywhere we go and in everything we do, the mind is free from attachments and delusions. We know and understand, but we do not cling. This is how we purify the mind and our senses. This is called “sitting on the platform of white lotuses,” like Avalokiteshvara or Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. The lotus blossom comes out of thick mud but remains pristine and pure. Our mind should be like that, rising from impurities but free from contamination.
A Bird Has Buddha Nature

Another story will help us realize that this awareness is buddha nature. Do not have a single trace of doubt, because if you do, it will be difficult to attain enlightenment. In the Tang dynasty there was a great patron of Buddhism named Pei Xiu, who had studied Buddhism in depth. One day he was in the Da Xiang Guo Monastery and saw that a sparrow had landed on top of a buddha statue, left its droppings on the buddha's head and flown away. Pei Xiu was very disturbed by this scene and thought, “The scriptures say that every sentient being, which certainly includes the sparrow, has buddha nature, so how can this bird leave its droppings on the buddha’s head?” Pei Xiu asked the abbot of the temple for an explanation. The abbot replied, “Certainly the sparrow has buddha nature. In fact, the bird is very intelligent; it knows that the buddha is very compassionate. That is why it left its droppings on the buddha's head instead of on the head of a hawk!”

The fact is that the sparrow knows where it is safe and where it is not; this “knowing” is the buddha nature.

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3 This is where the idiom “to poop on the buddha's head” came from, meaning an act of sacrilege.
Do not think that buddha nature is something too remote or too profound to understand; it is just this mind that knows, this sentience. Everyone has this mind that can distinguish good from evil, right from wrong. It is just that this mind has always been beset with afflictions, generating karmic hindrances, delusions and attachments, which cover up our originally pure mind, our inherent calmness and serenity. As a result, this pure mind becomes the deluded mind of a mundane person. Therefore, if you are absolutely sure that you have this buddha nature, then you are enlightened, and your mind will naturally be calm and unstirred.

**Maintaining the Enlightened Mind**

Once enlightened, we need to maintain this buddha nature so that it will always manifest. How? We need to “nurture it in stillness, discipline it through challenges.” To practice in stillness, the Chan seven-day meditation retreat gives us the best opportunity. Throughout the seven days, we try to keep this awareness clear, unstirred, and in control for 3 minutes, 5 minutes, and longer; practicing this way, we will definitely make immense progress. The *Surangama Sutra* states: “Cessation of de-
illusion is enlightenment.” The word “cease” is the key. Our mind is always busy, so in sitting meditation we let our thoughts cease and remain unmoved; we do not think about the past, the present, or the future. When we think about the past, we cling to the past; when we think about the present and the future, we cling to the present and the future; this is the “monkey mind.” The Diamond Sutra states: “The past mind is intangible, the present mind is intangible, the future mind is intangible.” It is useless to reminisce about the past, since it has already passed. If the past was pleasant, dwelling on it makes us sad. If the past was sad, thinking about it just adds to our pain. To ruminate about the present is to get trapped in transience. To speculate about the future is just daydreaming.

So where should the mind be? The mind should “act without any attachments.” The past mind is intangible; if we do not think about the past then the mind is not trapped in the past. The present mind is intangible; if we do not think about the present then the mind is not trapped by birth-and-death. The future mind is intangible; if we do not speculate about the future then the mind is not trapped in future fantasies. Then this is a mind of perfect clarity and understanding; it is the
profound mind of the tathagata; it is our original mind, our intrinsic nature. If you can maintain this enlightened state of mind for three minutes, you are a buddha for three minutes; if you can maintain it for ten minutes, you are a buddha for ten minutes. This is referred to as “nurturing the seed of enlightenment.” If you can practice like this then you will have truly advanced to the stage of “cultivating the Way.”

Preliminary and True Cultivation

Many of us practice to realize the Way but do not know where the Way is. At this stage, all the expedient means we practice, such as chanting the sutras, repentance, performing good deeds, or sitting meditation are simply “preliminary” cultivation, which can help us gradually get rid of our deeply rooted afflictions and attachments. Then, it is only in the future when our afflic-

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4 One way to describe the stages of becoming a buddha involves (1) the stage of “seeing the Way” (見道位), which means enlightenment, awakening to the truth; and (2) the stage of “cultivating the Way” (修道位), for only after enlightenment can one truly understand the nature of desires and other defilements. With this understanding, cultivation will yield effective results.
tions and attachments are reduced enough and when the time and conditions are right, for example, when we are listening to the Dharma or in a meditation retreat, that we may suddenly awaken to the original mind, the mind of non-attachment. This mind of non-attachment is the absolute truth; it transcends time and space. During meditation, in just one instant, we can awaken to the present mind—it feels utterly tranquil, clear and pure, and hours can pass in what seems like one single moment. As an ancient verse goes,

\textit{Living in the mountain}  
\textit{I feel no sense of time,}  
\textit{While in the mundane world}  
\textit{A thousand years have passed.}  

“No sense of time” refers to this absolute mind, where time and space do not exist. It is beyond this world. To go beyond this world is not something that happens after death. If we realize this original mind, we are immediately in the realm of a pure land, transformed from the mundane to the enlightened. The \textit{Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch} states: “Having the right view is to transcend this world. Having false views is to be in the mundane world.” This is truly the ultimate right view, the enlightened view of the tathagata.
All the different phenomena that we perceive are due to our consciousness, which perceives differently under varying conditions. For example, this lecture hall is bright when we turn on the light; it becomes dark when we turn off the light. Is this hall really dark or bright? Here in the United States it is daytime now, but in Taiwan it is nighttime. Is it really daytime or nighttime now? During the day, humans see more clearly than at night. Yet there are many animals that see clearly at night and are blind in the daytime. So is there true brightness or darkness?

A famous Confucian poem says,

Calmly observe –

The myriad phenomena are self-evident
Nature narrates itself perfectly.

If the mind is scattered and restless, then it is like trying to admire flowers while riding away on a horse—you won't be able to discern anything. If the mind can quiet down, you will naturally understand many truths in life. Therefore, “sudden awakening to the original mind and directly realizing buddhahood” is very important; it is intimately connected to our living and being.
I believe everyone now understands that we all have this original mind; however, this mind is still always restless and cluttered, constantly thinking about the past, the present, and the future, endlessly worrying about loss and gain. Our mind habitually acts this way because, in all of our lives, it has never stopped for ten minutes. As a result, we are strangers to ourselves. Now we understand that we must travel this path ourselves, this path of the mind.

The mundane mind is constantly afflicted by scattered thoughts. When it isn’t, it dozes off. When it is neither scattered nor drowsy, it is bored. These are the three problems of ordinary people. To counter these problems using different methods is the practice of gradual cultivation. Once we have overcome them, we must even let go of the methods that we have used and just maintain this pure awareness; this is the method of sudden enlightenment.

If we understand the principles of sudden enlightenment and gradual cultivation, then at anytime in our lives, we will always know how to practice. The scripture says that everyone can become a buddha. This is not just
an ideal or an exaggeration. Truly everyone has buddha nature; everyone can transcend the mundane and be enlightened. As long as we have this great aspiration, faith, and persistence, we will definitely arrive at this goal. Our life will be more fulfilling, more meaningful, filled with infinite light and infinite life.

I will give a final example to prove the case in point. In school, if a teacher explains the lesson clearly, then the students will listen with such interest that time and space will seem to have disappeared; they will not even notice when mosquitoes bite them. Suddenly, the bell rings and they cannot believe that this class has ended so soon. Conversely, if the teacher just reads from a book in a monotone, then the students may neither understand nor care to understand the lesson; they may look to the left and right and at their watch, and wonder why the class has not ended yet. Why is there such a difference? It is because the feeling of how fast or slow time passes depends on if our mind is discriminating and restless or completely focused and absorbed.

A sutra states: “If you focus your mind in one place, you can accomplish anything.” The Chan practice is to return the mind to oneness in order to realize our true
nature. If we have many discriminations, biases, and gripes, then one day will seem like a whole year. However, if our mind is tranquil and open, abiding in purity and in the absolute state which is unborn and undying, then one day, one year, a hundred years, or a thousand years may feel like an instant. The Dharma is the highest truth; living the Dharma is the pinnacle of life. If you have faith and persistence in following this path, you will find what you truly want. Life will be happier, more fulfilling, and full of hope.