

Abide in the Mahayana Mind

Dharma Lectures by the Grand Master Wei Chueh

“Abiding in the Mahayana Mind helps the self; skillfully employing expedient means helps others. By using various expedient means we can teach and guide countless sentient beings to abide in the Mahayana Mind.”

Expedient means and ultimate method

Today I will discuss the importance of “abide in the Mahayana mind while skillfully employing expedient means.” We have advanced from an agricultural society to the space age. Today, every person’s perception, values, and lifestyle differ; therefore, it is not easy to teach and practice Buddhism in the present society. An ancient master said, “Buddha taught countless Dharmas to heal different afflictions of the mind.” This points out that we should skillfully employ expedient means, methods employed by Buddhist masters to bring different kinds of people to enlightenment. If expedient means are not skillfully employed, there will be no benefit and there may even be harm. Yet, without expedient means, Buddha Dharma will become inaccessible and will not prosper.

Nevertheless, if there are only expedient means but no ultimate method, it will be difficult for both laypersons and monastics to reap the true benefits of the Buddha Dharma. The ultimate method can transcend all suffering and bring one to perfect enlightenment like the Buddha. To achieve this, we must abide in the Mahayana Mind.¹ Abiding in the Mahayana Mind helps the self; skillfully employing expedient means helps countless other sentient beings. By using various expedient means we can teach and guide countless sentient beings to abide in the Mahayana Mind.

An ancient master said, “One lamp dispels the darkness of a thousand years.” The lamp is this very mind that is listening to the Dharma right now. Enlightened, the afflicted mind becomes the bodhi mind and mundane existence becomes nirvana. The sutra says, “Single is the inherent nature we return to, many are the expedient gateways that bring us there.” This inherent nature is exactly the mind that is listening to the Dharma right now. So what is this present mind? It is this awareness.

¹ Mahayana Mind (大乘心): The bodhi mind, the enlightened mind, the original mind, the Buddha nature inherent in all of us.

Levels of enlightenment

There are different levels in the enlightenment of the mind. The first is “fundamental bodhi.” This is the inherent awareness that everyone has. It is what knows and what perceives. It is the mind that is hearing these words at this moment.

Mundane beings give rise to ignorance, affliction, greed, anger, killing, robbery, and adultery. Their lives are filled with darkness, emptiness, conflict, violence, and deception. We listen to the Dharma and study the sutras, and know that life consists of birth, aging, illness, and death. If we wish to be free from suffering, all we have to do is to transform our mind. We can transcend mundane existence, thereby attaining bodhi and nirvana. This is the beginning of enlightenment, or “initial bodhi.”

After “initial bodhi” we continue to work unceasingly. Whether by the method of sudden enlightenment or gradual cultivation, we finally eradicate the six fundamental afflictions of the mind: greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, doubt, and false views. This is called “sambodhi” (correct awakening), the state of the Buddhist saints.

After attaining sambodhi, we must continue to the path of Mahayana by generating a great compassionate mind, practicing the bodhisattva way, pursuing the noble Buddha path, and liberating all sentient beings. When we eventually realize the principle of the Middle Way Reality, we shatter our original ignorance. If we eradicate part of the ignorance, we reveal part of the Dharmakaya, the true body of the Buddha, which is neither physical nor non-physical. When the Dharmakaya is fully revealed, one attains buddhahood. This process is called “progressive realization of bodhi.”

Shattering all ignorance, realizing the Dharmakaya, we attain “virtually perfect bodhi”. At this stage we have not completely perfected buddhahood but are virtually equal to it. Finally, by entering into “vajra samadhi,” where the last vestige of ignorance is shattered, we complete buddhahood. This is known as “unsurpassed complete enlightenment” or “ultimate bodhi”.

“Awareness” is the bodhi mind: in the eyes it is the seeing; in the ears it is the hearing; in the nose it is the smelling of the fragrance; in the mouth it is the speaking; in the hands it is the grasping; in the feet it is the moving; in the faculty of consciousness, it is the thinking of the past, present and future. It is the mind that knows; this mind is at the gate of the six senses. Everyone has it.

Purity and defilement arise from the mind, not from outer objects

There once was a Chan Master, Miao Fung, who traveled far and wide on foot to seek the Dharma. He was spending the night at an inn and suddenly woke up with a fever. In the darkness, he groped his way to the kitchen to drink some water. The next day, he recollected the sweetness and fragrance of the water, and went back to get some more. What he found was actually dirty and smelly water used for washing the feet. He immediately vomited, but at that very moment he was enlightened to the nature of the mind: “When drinking, it is very sweet; when smelling, it is very fetid; purity and defilement arise from the mind, and not from external objects.” The water had not changed; the difference was all due to his discriminating mind, the mind of attachment.

After enlightenment, we still need to practice gradual cultivation to attain the Way. The Way is not something that we create. Whatever is created will perish; it does not last. To cultivate the Way is to eliminate delusive thoughts, afflictions, ignorance, and karmic habits, so that the inherent nature of our mind will naturally manifest. This is the Way.

This mind must be totally clear. It is not a simple task. It depends on our determination. For example, try this in meditation: for three minutes do not think of anything in the past, present, or future; do not become drowsy; be the master of your mind. When you achieve this, you will be like a buddha for three minutes. If you can maintain this for ten minutes, you will be like a buddha for ten minutes. This pure and lucid mind is our true self.

To abide constantly in this pure mind is to “abide in the Mahayana Mind.” But in our present society, if we only talk about the above principle, most people may not easily understand or accept it. Therefore, we also need to “skillfully employ expedient means.” Without different expedient means to help and guide countless sentient beings to enlightenment, most people have no way of attaining buddhahood.

Five directions of Buddhism

At Chung Tai, we set forth five expedient means in propagating Buddhism to the multitude:

1. **Buddhism in Academic Research:** Buddhism is fundamentally the study of profound wisdom. We can use modern methods of research to investigate Buddhism so that the study can be more systematic and accessible. This expedient means helps the academic world understand the Dharma.
2. **Buddhism in Education:** Chung Tai Chan Monastery established its Buddhist Institute to educate the Sangha, and over 100 meditation centers worldwide to teach the Dharma and meditation to countless people. Furthermore, it established the Pu Tai elementary, middle, and high schools to apply the Buddhist principles in education.

3. **Buddhism in Science:** Buddha's approach to understanding reality and human suffering is based on empirical observations; this is in congruence with scientific methods. The principle of causality is fundamental in Buddhism and science. In addition, we use modern technology, such as computers and the internet, to spread the awareness of Buddhism.
4. **Buddhism in Culture and the Arts:** Throughout the ages, Buddhism has inspired prominent and outstanding artistic creations. The architecture of Chung Tai Chan Monastery embodies Buddhist art and symbolism from ancient India and China along with modern engineering and technology.
5. **Buddhism in Daily Living:** Buddhism is very practical and anyone can lead a happier life by following its principles. For example, the Four Tenets of Chung Tai are practical ways to apply Buddhism in daily life: (1) to our elders be respectful, (2) to our juniors be kind, (3) with all humanity be harmonious, and (4) in all our endeavors be true.

In summary, applying the central principles of Mahayana Buddhism benefits the self by benefiting others. If we can abide in the Mahayana Mind and skillfully employ expedient means, make diligent effort and persist in these directions, we will surely bring happiness to ourselves and to others.