

Discourse on Practicing and Studying the Buddha-dharma

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Preface

In this era, when the whole world is in chaos, practicing and studying the Buddha-dharma is not that easy. According to the Buddha-dharma, all phenomena are impermanent. As long as the actions we undertake are of benefit to ourselves and others, we should carry out these deeds without thinking about how difficult the situation is or how long these [wholesome deeds] can continue. One day, the work of these deeds will lead to corresponding effects. Even if the effect is just for a day or a moment, it is still beneficial. We should keep in mind the great vow of sacrifice for the Dharma when practicing and studying the Dharma. This is the spirit that all practitioners should cultivate.

When we study the Buddha-dharma, we should begin with the noble teachings, the *sūtras* and treatises. However, studying the Buddha-dharma[, like a school subject,] is not a well-rounded way to practice and study the Buddha-dharma. Studying the Dharma is only the foundation of practicing and studying the Buddha-dharma, so we must not regard the study of the teachings as being the most important, but nor should it be neglected. Practicing and studying the Buddha-dharma should include the two aspects of understanding and application.

On Studying the Dharma

The first step for a Buddhist practitioner is to study the Buddha-dharma. “Study” means to listen to others’ explanations [of the Dharma]. In general, Buddhists presume that reciting a *sūtra* can bring them some merits. In fact, what really yields merit is [the component of] understanding the Dharma [while reciting *sūtras*]. Śāriputra once said to the Buddha, “If I did not hear the Dharma from the Buddha, I would be like a blind person.” Śāriputra is regarded as the noble one foremost in wisdom among the Buddha’s great disciples. Even such a wise disciple still needs to hear the Dharma from the Buddha, as do the ordinary people whose spiritual capacity is much weaker and duller. The Buddha-dharma is the brilliant light that can save the world and liberate humans. It is not possible to gain the true benefits of the Buddha-dharma without studying the Dharma. In the *sūtras* it is said:

Studying and deep understanding enable one to discern the correct teachings.

Studying and deep understanding enable one to avoid wrong doings.

Studying and deep understanding enable one to abandon meaningless practices.

Studying and deep understanding enable one to attain nirvana.

Only by studying the Dharma will we be able to discern the Dharma teachings and gain a right understanding of the Buddha-dharma. It is also through studying the Dharma that one is able to discern the morals of this world, such as right and wrong, good and bad, wholesome and unwholesome. Such understandings are all due to the skill of discernment gained from learning the Dharma.

The priority of a Buddhist practitioner is to abandon unwholesome deeds, while ordinary beings who do not study the Dharma and are ignorant undertake unwholesome deeds without even knowing it. It is on account of studying and having deep understanding of the Dharma

that one is able to realize the truth that things arise and cease due to conditions, and able to completely change one's physical and mental behaviors for the better. In this way one can give up unwholesome activities and become a new person whose character is lofty. Studying the Dharma is like looking at oneself in a mirror. One is able to see clearly how one looks, whether one's appearance is neat or messy, and one's clothes are straight or crooked. Accordingly, one can make changes to correct anything that is not right.

In this world there are many practitioners who want to be a good person. However, because they do not study the Dharma, they end up adopting meaningless practices as the means toward to the truth, and actively apply these means as if they were spiritual paths. For example, in India there are many different meaningless practices, such as upholding the precepts of cows and dogs.¹ In China there are some cults, like Xiantian Dao [more commonly known as Tian Dao] and Yiguan Dao, that take what is not the way to be the way, and mistake lower spiritual attainments to be higher spiritual attainments. After learning the Dharma and gaining deep understanding of the Dharma one will no longer undertake these meaningless practices that have no benefit to anyone.

After studying the Buddha-dharma, one can develop wisdom that is equipped with right views and understanding. Using this right view and understanding, one can clear away all delusional attachments to an intrinsic self and then attain nirvana. For those who practice the *Mahāyāna*, studying and having deep understanding of the righteous Dharma will give rise to confidence and superior understanding² in the *Mahāyāna*. As a result, they will never regress [from the *Mahāyāna*].

Some people say that someone studying the Buddha-dharma should focus on real practice because learning without practice is merely accumulating trivial knowledge. This is a pointless view, and these advocates cannot be regarded as true Buddhist practitioners. We should know that, although this claim is partially correct, in order to really practice the Buddha-dharma we have to begin with studying the Dharma. Studying the Dharma is a necessary stage in the practice of the Buddha-dharma.

Practitioners in China tend to develop extremes in terms of practicing the Buddha-dharma. On one side, some think that reading the Buddhist texts cannot compare with real practice. As a result, they throw away the texts and go about seeking [the ultimate goal] in the dark, which leads them to a deep abyss of imperceptive practice. [Ironically,] Buddhism that is founded by the Omniscient One (the Buddha) became another style of practice that the ignorant and uneducated superstitiously adopted as a belief.

On the other side, some focus only on studying the Dharma extensively. They become obsessed with developing the skills in understanding the meanings of words, sentences, and phrases, and are unable to apply the Dharma to taming their own bodies and minds. This type of practitioner

¹ The precepts of cows and dogs refer to records of some spiritual practitioners who in deep meditation saw a cow or dog die and become reborn in heaven. Thus, they ignorantly believed that the behaviors of cows/dogs were the key to gaining a good rebirth and so they too adopted behaviors of cows and dogs as their spiritual practice.

² Superior understanding is a profound understanding that also includes a strong level of conviction.

not only lacks the spirit of real practice, but also often disobeys the righteous behaviors that one should have. It is no wonder that Buddhists who focus on real practice dislike the term “Buddha-dharma studies” because it has now become a term that is often used academically to refer to the aspect of knowledge that hardly includes any Buddhist practice.

A true Buddhist practitioner always merges the aspect of understanding founded on wisdom, with the aspect of practice founded on confidence. Therefore, we should study the Dharma on the one hand, while applying what we learn as an actual practice on the other hand. Only in this way can we avoid criticisms of being extremely unbalanced.

Studying [in ancient times] was based on listening [to the Dharma]. During the Buddha’s time, the disciples heard the Dharma directly from the Buddha because there were no pre-existing *sūtras* available. After listening to the teachings, they committed them to memory.

In the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* it is said, “The true essence of the teachings in this world is based on the voices that disciples hear with pure mind.” In Ancient India, the Buddha’s teachings were separately transmitted by word of mouth. After the Buddha passed away, [the teachings] were systematically collated and edited[, and were memorized by the disciples]. Subsequently, the teachings were transmitted in written form, and even later as printing became more common, the teachings were printed and distributed. Now that we have canonical texts, we can also study the Dharma from these texts.

In the *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, Nāgārjuna points out several ways to study the Dharma: “There are three sources for studying the Buddha-dharma. We can study from the Buddha, the Buddha’s disciples, and the canonical texts.” If the situation is that the Buddha has already passed away and it is difficult to find a Buddhist who knows the true meaning of the Dharma, the only option is to study from the canonical texts. When we read the scriptural texts and contemplate their meaning with the utmost respect in our minds, this is similar in effect to studying the Dharma directly from the Buddha or the Buddha’s disciples. Even though we are studying by reading, it can also be regarded as studying by listening.

Therefore, studying the Buddha-dharma should follow two principles. One is to study by listening to teachers and wise friends, and the other is to undertake in-depth self-study. I presume that in the present age, one should focus on self-study when studying and practicing the Buddha-dharma. Just through listening to the talks of others, the effect of studying the Dharma in this way is usually superficial and we just follow the crowd. [Rather,] we must exert a good level of effort to study the Dharma and then we can really penetrate deep into the meaning of the canonical texts and grasp the core of the Buddha-dharma. Our comprehension should not be limited by the ancient sages’ commentaries. We should have our own [true understanding of the texts]. Nevertheless, beginners must study the Dharma by listening to others’ teachings first.

Goal of Studying the Dharma

When studying the Dharma we must have a goal. That is, why should we study the Dharma? In order to attain that goal, we must follow a proper process where there are distinct steps and stages, from a beginner's level to advanced levels.

Now, let us look at the goal first. There are two types of aspirations [that correspond to two different goals]. The first type of aspiration is to end one's cycle of life and death, which includes the *Śrāvakayāna* aspiration, also called the aspiration to leave cyclic existence in this world. After making this kind of aspiration and undertaking the commensurate practice to completion, one can attain arhatship. The second type of aspiration is to attain perfect awakening (bodhi), which is the *Mahāyāna* aspiration that aims to benefit oneself and others. This is captured in the saying, "To seek the Buddha's awakening and deliver sentient beings from suffering."

In summary, the core purpose of studying the Buddha-dharma is none other than to liberate oneself and others from the cycle of life and death, and to universally benefit all sentient beings. Now, this purpose of studying the Buddha-dharma will be explained through three aspects. The first aspect is about purification of our own body and mind. The second concerns the propagation of the righteous Dharma. The last aspect is about benefiting and relieving sentient beings.

Purifying of Our Own Body and Mind

The actual situation of ordinary beings is that our psychological and physical behaviors are not pure and our understanding is defiled and polluted. Due to having polluted views, one recklessly creates unwholesome karmas, which bring suffering to oneself and also causes others vexation. [In other words, as ordinary beings] we are caught in cyclic existence, and all others in this world endure immense suffering endlessly. Studying the Buddha-dharma begins with purifying our body and mind. This is to reduce the unwholesome karmas that bring about obstacles that hinder us. [Namely,] one is certain about abstaining from major evils such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying. In addition, one also does not commit minor faults that may occur in daily activities, such as moving, staying still, talking or being silent. In this way one can gradually tame one's greed, hatred, ignorance, and other defilements. Accordingly, one's behaviors will also gradually become pure, and this is the most important matter for those who study the Buddha-dharma.

If a person's behaviors are bad then such a person is not even equipped with basic human morals. How, then, can they end their cycle of life and death? Over the past century, the reason for the decline of Chinese Buddhism is because the monastics misunderstood the meaning of maintaining the Buddha-dharma.³ [As a result, the monastics] are unable to skilfully draw in and teach the devotees, and consequently the devotees do not know that they should display the great function of the Buddha-dharma through purifying their bodies and minds. If the

³ Venerable Yinshun explains that over the past century, Chinese Buddhism has focused more on emptiness and mystical spiritual experiences, which are related to more advanced meditative achievements. But the basic Buddhist teachings about moral behaviors have become less important.

Buddha-dharma is not used to help people purify their bodies and minds, then teaching the Dharma is merely an activity done for show, and nothing beneficial is found in the Buddha-dharma.

Whether one practices the *Śrāvakayāna* or *Mahāyāna*, these paths cannot be separated from the purification of the body and mind, and all teachings in the *sūtras* and treatises convey the same message. Therefore, the purification of the body and mind is the most fundamental matter for all Buddhist practitioners. If we neglect this point, then with our study of the Buddha-dharma, and even if we become a monastic practitioner, we really gain no benefit from the Buddha-dharma. We must take the purification of body and mind as our initial goal. If we depart from this goal, then our study of the Buddha-dharma has no foundation.

Propagation of the Righteous Dharma

However, purifying our own body and mind is not enough. Although changing our behaviors enables us to gain peace and happiness, and purifying our body and mind can bring us to nirvana, these are purely for self-benefit. Instead, we should follow in the Buddha's footsteps and aspire to great compassion and great vows. Great vows refer to propagating the righteous Dharma, and great compassion refers to benefiting and relieving sentient beings.

The Buddha-dharma is the ultimate light for every being in this world. Any matter in this world that goes against the grain of the Buddha-dharma will end up with tragic results, and the same results occur for those people whose behaviors are contrary to the Buddha-dharma. Hence, an [ideal] monastic practitioner must initiate a great vow to propagate the righteous Dharma for the sake of helping people in the world to correctly understand the Buddha-dharma, behave according to it, and thus attain the ultimate benefit; that is, the ultimate peace and happiness.

Benefiting and Relieving Sentient Beings

When one promotes the Buddha-dharma, one's purpose should not simply be to spread the teachings. Rather, it is for the sake of bringing benefit and relief to sentient beings. It is true that other religions, governments, the sciences and so on also have their particular strengths in terms of helping sentient beings. However, none of these fields can bring sentient beings to the ultimate benefit [of liberation], and instead some of their methods can create more harm than good. Given that a monastic practitioner studies the Dharma for the sake of benefiting and relieving sentient beings, they should follow what is taught in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, which says, "Study the Dharma for the sake of delivering sentient beings [from suffering]." That is to say, what a bodhisattva has in mind is none other than the thought of studying the Dharma for the sake of benefiting and relieving sentient beings. If one's mind is only preoccupied with this thought, which places no focus on oneself but purely focuses on others, then one has truly initiated the bodhi mind.

This is parallel to the case of a person learning a skill. If their purpose is purely for the sake of earning a living, then their ambition is quite ordinary. If they learn various skills in order to enhance the wellbeing of society, they will win the praise and respect of others. Studying the Buddha-dharma is the same. If one only aims to purify one's body and mind, to seek liberation,

and attain nirvana, one is merely a practitioner who cares for nothing but oneself. If one initiates the bodhi mind, undertakes the bodhisattva practices for the sake of people and other beings, then this is truly extraordinary. The reason bodhisattvas develop great compassion is because they cannot bear the situation in which beings are in extreme suffering and the Buddha-dharma is in decline. When one develops great compassion and practices the Buddha-dharma on account of such motivation, one's bodhi mind is self-motivated, and is very strong and powerful. Such a bodhi mind is most praiseworthy!

There is something different between a monastic practitioner and a lay practitioner in terms of studying the Dharma. For both types of practitioner, the purpose, such as to end the three poisons (i.e. greed, hatred, and ignorance) and to attain the three undefiled trainings [morality, meditation, wisdom] is essentially the same. The difference lies in the point that monastic practitioners have an extra responsibility, which is to maintain the Buddha-dharma. Hence, it is satisfactory for a lay practitioner to learn one method just for the purpose of taming their defilements. Monastic practitioners must learn many methods in order to benefit and relieve sentient beings. I presume that one must learn to be a bodhisattva if one really wants to be capable of bearing the monastic responsibility of maintaining the Dharma. The *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* teach that, "Bodhisattvas thoroughly study all types of practices (the practices of becoming a buddha, an arhat, and a *pratyekabuddha*)." The wisdom of bodhisattvas is called the wisdom with which one is able to adopt various means. Only when [bodhisattvas] know myriad of methods can they universally deliver sentient beings [from suffering]. This is parallel to the case of being a doctor. An ordinary doctor can only prescribe one type of medicine, while a great doctor has access to many different types of medicine. A single type of medicine can only cure a limited number of illnesses, which then limits how many people can be saved. Having many more medicines means one can cure many more illnesses, and thus can save countless people.

Likewise, if a monastic practitioner focuses only on self-liberation, then perhaps specialising in a single practice would suffice. However, they would only be able to teach and benefit people with a certain type of spiritual capacity, and could not bear the responsibility of maintaining the Buddha-dharma. Therefore, bodhisattvas who initiate great compassion must extensively learn all the countless practices (this applies to both monastic and lay bodhisattvas). Only in this way can they cater to the different interests and spiritual capacities of sentient beings. [Bodhisattvas also] study the practices of the *Śrāvakayāna* but they do not regard its goal as the ultimate awakening. In addition, they study the practices of the *Mahāyāna* and accomplish its goal. Moreover, bodhisattvas should also study other non-Buddhist teachings because only by understanding these texts can a bodhisattva point out their shortcomings. At times when the conditions mature, on account of just a few words those non-Buddhists can even be converted to Buddhism and take refuge in the Triple Gem.

However, if a bodhisattva just converted to Buddhism from another religion and starts to learn the Buddha-dharma, they must be taught with stricter guidance. Namely, they must not be allowed to study the texts of other religions until they have developed deep faith in the Buddha-dharma. This is because of the concern that they may fall back into the path of heretics when their previous beliefs are stirred up. This also applies to those *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners [who

have just embarked on the *Mahāyāna*]. In this respect, the *Lotus Sūtra* says, “A bodhisattva should not associate with *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners.” This is because in the *Lotus Sūtra* many bodhisattvas are those who have just turned to the *Mahāyāna* from the *Śrāvakayāna* path. If these bodhisattvas are not requested to cut off all ties with the *Śrāvakayāna*, they may return to it.

When the *tripiṭaka* master Venerable Xuanzang was studying at the Nalanda monastery in India, apart from lectures on the *Mahāyāna* teachings, lectures on all the *Śrāvakayāna* practices and the teachings of other beliefs were also given in that monastery. This is the *Mahāyāna* characteristic of thoroughly and universally studying all dharmas.

[As Buddhist practitioners,] we should first establish a deep understanding of the Buddha-dharma, and then undertake the career of propagating the righteous Dharma and benefiting sentient beings through the fundamental practice of purifying our body and mind. Especially in this age, when the world is so chaotic and sentient beings are experiencing immense suffering, we must hold dear the great vows of prolonging the matters that embody wisdom and sympathize with all sentient beings. It is said in the [*Mahāyāna*] *sūtras*, “What a bodhisattva vows is to liberate others first even though they themselves are yet to be liberated.” This is the type of aspiration that we should develop. In terms of actual practices, [one may question:] if we cannot even benefit ourselves, how can we benefit others? [This is partially true but] for any matter [we deem important,] if we do not personally approach it in that manner, it will be difficult to win the recognition and acceptance of others, which means that it would be impossible to realize the goal of propagating the righteous Dharma and benefiting sentient beings.

Process of Studying the Dharma

Now, let us look at the process of studying the Buddha-dharma. There is a natural process to the study and practice of the Buddha-dharma, which cannot be bypassed. Within the Buddha-dharma, the most crucial element is wisdom. It can be said that studying and practicing the Buddha-dharma is indeed to develop wisdom. However, this is not to say that all other practices can be done away with. Other practices such as generosity, morality, tolerance, and so forth are also necessary. The point is that among all the various practices the most important element is wisdom, which is also the unique element of the Buddha-dharma that enables practitioners to achieve the ultimate goal.

The beings in this world do wish to be free from suffering and to attain happiness, yet it is as though they are wandering around in the dark. The Buddha-dharma is like a brilliant light that guides sentient beings. It even teaches about the guidance, such as what should be done, what should be avoided, what is good, what is evil, what is right, and what is wrong. These teachings can help people follow the path led by right view and right understanding, and eventually it is definite that they attain their aim. The Buddha is the perfectly awakened one while bodhisattvas are beings with wisdom. This means that the unique characteristic of buddhas and bodhisattvas is their possession of wisdom.

Apart from wisdom, all other practices must be merged with wisdom. Only in this way can one accomplish them successfully. If we practice the Buddha-dharma without wisdom then no matter how we strive, liberation from life and death will not be attained. That is why the *Mahāyāna sūtras* say, “Compared with the other five *pāramitās*, *prajñāpāramitā* (perfection of wisdom) is the loftiest and sublime...It is *prajñāpāramitā* that enables all wholesome practices to help practitioners become *sarvajña* (omniscient).” The wisdom that the Buddha-dharma refers to is not what worldly knowledge can be compared with, and it has different degrees, such as basic levels and advanced levels. In contrast, virtuous and meritorious karmas [taught in the Buddha-dharma] are mostly common to that in this world. Therefore, the process of studying and practicing the Buddha-dharma is also the process of studying and developing wisdom.

Wisdom is graded from basic to advanced levels. “Wisdom endowed at birth” is what we are innately born with, and every person born in this world has this wisdom. It is equivalent to knowledge that can be extensively developed (albeit with limitations) if the right worldly conditions prevail. This is an ordinary type of wisdom. Even philosophers, scientists and so on, their [achievement] is also attained through [developed levels of] wisdom endowed at birth.

In addition, there is “wisdom resulting from learning,” and we must begin our study and practice of the Buddha-dharma with this wisdom. [The development of this wisdom is] through extensive learning of the Dharma (i.e. listening to Dharma talks and reading scriptures). Only in this way can we establish a correct and deep understanding of the Buddha-dharma. That is, we understand the truth about this world and human existence, develop deep and absolute faith in and understanding of the Buddha-dharma, Triple Gem, four noble truths and so on. Only through the wisdom resulting from extensive learning of the righteous Dharma can we know these truths. When accomplishing this wisdom resulting from learning, we then start to have the wisdom to which the Buddha-dharma refers.

The further stage is to embark on the “wisdom resulting from contemplation.” Contemplation is to examine or discern. We must contemplate and discern thoroughly so that we can have deeper awakening to, and understanding of, the Buddha-dharma, and then attain the wisdom resulting from contemplation.

Both the wisdoms resulting from learning and contemplation are discernment without tranquility (meditative states). We need to move further to accomplish the “wisdom resulting from practice.” This is a wisdom that is merged with tranquility in a meditative state. When wisdom is developed in a meditative state and becomes deeper, this is the true wisdom resulting from practice.

The three wisdoms that result from learning, contemplation, and practice are still not well purified, and such kinds of wisdoms are unable to completely cut off all defilements and end the cycle of life and death. If we want to cut off the roots of defilements and gain liberation from cyclic existence, we must attain the *prajñā* that is well purified and transcendental. The *prajñā* with which one can realize the truth is true wisdom, which is also called wisdom that is well purified and transcendental (wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice are the

prajñā of engaged effort). From the wisdom of learning up to well-purified and transcendental wisdom, this is the path to develop wisdom. This process is universal to both the *Śrāvakayāna* and *Mahāyāna* paths.

Generally speaking, there are three types of *prajñā*, namely *prajñā* gained from language, contemplation, and realization. These *prajñās* can correlate to the aforementioned stages of developing wisdom. The wisdom resulting from learning is the *prajñā* gained from language. The further progression is to cultivate *prajñā* gained from contemplation, which corresponds to the stages of wisdom resulting from contemplation and practice. The *prajñā* gained from realization of the truth is the well-purified transcendental wisdom. From the stages of learning, contemplation, practice, and up to the attainment of true realization, it is clear in general that these are sequential steps in the process of studying and practicing, although the three stages are interrelated and mutually help each other to develop.

Three Types of <i>Prajna</i>	Stages of Developing Wisdom
<i>Prajñā</i> gained from language	Wisdom resulting from learning
<i>Prajñā</i> gained from contemplation	Wisdom resulting from contemplation
	Wisdom resulting from practice
<i>Prajñā</i> gained from realization of the truth	Well-purified transcendental wisdom

In Buddhism, there is a commonly taught process for studying and practicing the Buddha-dharma, which is to associate with good spiritual guides, listen to righteous Dharma teachings, contemplate the Dharma properly and thoroughly, and practice the noble eightfold path for the sake of nirvana. These are collectively called the four factors for entry into sagehood. Entry into sagehood for the *Śrāvakayāna* is the first fruit,⁴ and for the *Mahāyāna* it is the first *bhūmi*.⁵ If an ordinary being wants to progress into the ranks of the sages or enter into the state of realizing the truth of all dharmas, they must accomplish these four stages of study and practice. This applies to both the *Śrāvakayāna* and *Mahāyāna*.

⁴ The *Śrāvakayāna* goal is marked by four levels of fruition. The first fruit is the stage of a stream-enterer (*srotāpanna*, 預流) where one has only seven rounds of rebirth in the human and heavenly realms before their attainment of arhatship. The second fruit is the once-returned (*sakṛdāgāmin*, 一來) and, as the name suggests, the practitioner has only one round of rebirth in the human and heavenly realms before they attain arhatship. The third fruit is the non-returned (*anāgāmin*, 不還), whereby the practitioner will no longer be born in the human realm but will spend their last life in the heavenly realm and attain arhatship there. The fourth fruit is arhatship (*arhat*, 阿羅漢) which is when one attains liberation from cyclic existence and enters nirvana.

⁵ *Bhūmi* is Sanskrit for ground. It also means level, stage, and so on. This is referring to the final ten stages before a bodhisattva attains Buddhahood. These ten stages or *bhūmis* are a very advanced level of practice and cultivation.

Association with good spiritual guides is necessary because traditionally the Buddha-dharma has been transmitted verbally. Therefore, in order to listen to the righteous Dharma teachings, it is necessary to first associate with good teachers. Our fellow practitioners can also fall within the scope of good spiritual guides. Why must we associate with good spiritual guides? The reason is to listen to righteous Dharma teachings. After hearing the teachings, we must go further to understand them correctly. This requires us to contemplate the Dharma properly and thoroughly. Through contemplation and discernment, we can gain a deep understanding of the Buddha-dharma. Then we must practice the teachings accordingly, which is practicing the noble eightfold path for the sake of nirvana.

[The first two factors of] associating with good spiritual guides and listening to the righteous Dharma teachings exactly correspond to the aforementioned wisdom resulting from learning. Contemplating the Dharma properly and thoroughly corresponds to the wisdom resulting from contemplation, while practicing the noble eightfold path for the sake of nirvana corresponds to the wisdom resulting from practice. After the accomplishment of these four factors, one enters the stage of seeing the truth, and attains entry into sagehood. At this moment, one attains the well-purified transcendental wisdom. This is why I say that the process of studying and practicing the Buddha-dharma is the process of studying and developing wisdom. However, this is not to say that merely cultivating wisdom is enough. In the process of cultivating wisdom, we must simultaneously cultivate and undertake the other virtues too. This is because only cultivating virtues or wisdom will not result in perfection. Wisdom and virtues are like the wings of a bird, or the two wheels of a cart. Only when these two supports complement each other will we be able to go the distance.

Four Factors for Entry into Sagehood	Stages of Developing Wisdom
Associating with good spiritual guides and	Wisdom resulting from learning
Listening to the righteous Dharma teachings	
Contemplating the Dharma properly and thoroughly	Wisdom resulting from contemplation
Practicing the noble eightfold path for the sake of nirvana	Wisdom resulting from practice

As we progress from the beginner to advanced stages of developing wisdom, simultaneously we develop [the following other virtues].

Virtues	Stages of Developing Wisdom
Accomplishment of faith/confidence [in the Buddha-dharma]	Attainment of wisdom resulting from learning
Fulfilment of the precepts	Attainment of wisdom resulting from contemplation
Achievement of meditative concentration	Attainment of wisdom resulting from practice
Acquisition of [true] wisdom	Attainment of transcendental wisdom

Three Types of <i>Prajñā</i>	Four Factors for Entry into Sagehood	Stages of Developing Wisdom	Virtues
<i>Prajñā</i> gained from language	Associating with good spiritual guides and	Wisdom resulting from learning	Accomplishment of faith/confidence [in the Buddha-dharma]
	Listening to the righteous Dharma teachings		
<i>Prajñā</i> gained from contemplation	Contemplating the Dharma properly and thoroughly	Wisdom resulting from contemplation	Fulfilment of the precepts
		Wisdom resulting from practice	Achievement of meditative concentration
<i>Prajñā</i> gained from realization of the truth	Practicing the noble eightfold path for the sake of nirvana	Well-purified transcendental wisdom	Acquisition of [true] wisdom

Through associating with good spiritual guides and listening to righteous Dharma teachings, we are able to accomplish the wisdom resulting from learning. Based on this wisdom, we can have absolute faith without any doubts regarding the Buddha-dharma's teachings on the Triple Gem, four noble truths, dependent co-arising, the noble eightfold path and its results, and so on. Then we are able to develop the aspiration to realize the teachings. The faith that can give

rise to aspiration should be established through superior understanding. Such a faith is firm, unshakeable and able to propel us into action. This is a faith that is the root of virtues. Ordinary faith is unstable and wavers like a feather tossed around by the wind. This is because ordinary faith is founded on emotions and not from careful contemplation and discernment. Therefore, ordinary faith lacks determination and stability. True faith must be developed on the basis of the wisdom resulting from learning. Only such a right faith can be considered a spiritual root. Hence, right faith is described as “the origin of virtues.”

This is just like plants that only after developing healthy roots can they grow strong and tall; that is to say, all the stems, branches, flowers, and fruits develop from the roots. In the *Śrāvakayāna* practice, the spiritual root of faith, which develops from the wisdom resulting from learning, gives rise to a sincere aspiration to leave [cyclic existence]. Once this aspiration arises it means the wholesome root for liberation has developed and will not wither, and it is definite that one will end cyclic existence. In the *Mahāyāna* practice, the right faith based on the wisdom resulting from learning [*Mahāyāna* teachings] is also the aspiration for bodhi (Buddha’s awakening), which is the seed for attaining Buddhahood, just as what is taught in the *Treatise on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* and other similar scriptures. Regarding a Buddhist practitioner’s aspiration, there are no other than these two types, namely the aspiration to leave this world, and the aspiration for bodhi. Both aspirations can only arise successfully from the faith based on the wisdom resulting from learning.

One who truly has the aspiration to leave cyclic existence or has the aspiration for bodhi is like a fish that has taken the bait. No matter how much they resist they will soon leave the water. Take Śāriputra’s story for example, who in the past had developed the aspiration for bodhi. Although along the path of practice he had forgotten about this aspiration, as soon as the Buddha reminded him, he was able to return to the *Mahāyāna*. This situation is the meaning behind the saying, “Once heard by the ears, never will it be forgotten.” Only after we have initiated true aspiration can we be regarded as entering the very beginning level of the Buddhist path. In the *Mahāyāna*, the aspiration is to perfect the bodhi mind while in the *Śrāvakayāna* the aspiration is to leave cyclic existence. According to the Tiantai school’s six phases towards Buddhahood, when practitioners achieve the right faith based on the wisdom resulting from learning, they still only attain the second phase towards Buddhahood, which is called a buddha merely by name.

After we attain deep faith through the wisdom of learning, we must continue to practice and accomplish the wisdom resulting from contemplation. In this stage we must focus on the cultivation of morality as our main practice, while at the same time practicing the other virtues of generosity, tolerance, and so on. From here, *Mahāyāna* practitioners undertake countless deeds to benefit the self and others through practicing the six *pāramitās*. As for *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners, with the accomplishment of the wisdom resulting from contemplation, they are definitely able to strictly abide by the precepts and completely purify their behaviors such that they will never consider violating the precepts, even the very minor ones. [In other words,] this is to fulfill the purification of the three karmas [of actions, speech, and thoughts] through actual practices based on the understanding of the Buddha-dharma, which is derived from the wisdom

resulting from contemplation. Only by studying and practicing the Dharma in this way will there be wisdom, merits, and virtues.

Moving onto the wisdom resulting from practice, this must be in accordance with meditative concentration. Therefore, we reach the stage where concentration and wisdom are cultivated together. The wisdom resulting from practice must align with concentration. In terms of the *Śrāvakayāna* progression, this corresponds to the four stages of engaged effort: warmth, summit, receptivity, and supreme worldly Dharma, while on the *Mahāyāna* path this corresponds to the ten levels of dedication.

After developing true faith, one then upholds the precepts well and develops meditative concentration. Accordingly, true *prajñā* arises, with which one can end delusions and realize the truth. At this point, this level corresponds to attaining the first fruit in the *Śrāvakayāna* practice. For *Mahāyāna* practitioners, this level corresponds to the first *bhūmi*, and under the Tiantai system it is the [fifth] phase towards Buddhahood, which is called a buddha of partial realization. If we wish to attain perfection of wisdom, we still have to practice and progress through the *bhūmis*. Only then will the perfection of Buddhahood be accomplished.

[To sum up,] it is absolutely true that studying and practicing the Buddha-dharma is studying and cultivating wisdom. When one's wisdom has been well developed and has become perfect and most profound, one then attains Buddhahood. Regardless of whether we are looking at the progression in the *Śrāvakayāna* or *Mahāyāna*, the progressive stages of practicing the Dharma are all the same. Here, the progression in the *Mahāyāna* may refer to the six phases towards Buddhahood in the Tiantai school, or the five stages in the Consciousness-only school. At present we are still at the level of ordinary wisdom endowed at birth while we are here listening to the Buddha-dharma and practicing it. We have yet to reach the true wisdom resulting from learning, let alone the other stages of wisdom. When one really achieves the stage of wisdom resulting from learning, this wisdom corresponds to the level where the aspiration for bodhi is established in the *Mahāyāna*. Such a wisdom is also described as great and deep understanding of the truth. This is the initial stage in the study and practice of the Buddha-dharma and all Buddhist practitioners must go through this level.

There are three key points in this talk. The first is that the study and practice of the Buddha-dharma is essentially the study and cultivation of wisdom. The second is that in the study and cultivation of wisdom one cannot be partial to just the practice of wisdom. Rather, one must simultaneously embark on the study and practice of meditation, morality, tolerance, and so on as supplements. The third is to clarify that when we investigate the Buddha-dharma this is nothing all that lofty and profound. It is merely the starting point from the wisdom endowed at birth to the wisdom resulting from learning. Even though one gains a better understanding of the Buddha-dharma through listening to the Dharma, this is only just scratching the surface. The great wisdom to be gained from the Buddha-dharma is yet to come, and only through further progression in our practice can we realize the attainment of great wisdom.

Sequential Steps to Begin Learning the Dharma

Now, I would like to narrow the focus of the discussion. Learning or studying the Dharma also has a sequential process. I have been asked how should one study or investigate the Buddha's teachings. It is not easy to answer this question. However, I presume that there should be three phases when studying and practicing the Buddha-dharma, whether one is learning it broadly or focusing on a particular school. If one studies according to these three phases, then some or several benefits would be gained. The three phases are (1) grasping the main ideas, (2) delving deep, and (3) seeing the coherence among different teachings.

The first is to grasp the main ideas. The Buddha-dharma is vast and boundless, and so where should one start their studies? If one studies the Buddha-dharma in an arbitrary manner, one would be unable to comprehend the core essentials of the Buddha-dharma. Even if we take a worldly subject for instance, in order to study it [efficiently] we must first grasp an overview of it by selecting some entry-level but essential books to read. The approach to studying the Buddha-dharma is the same. First, we must gain a proper overall understanding of the Buddha's teachings; that is, to know what the core elements of the Buddha-dharma are, what the tenets of major schools are, and so on. [In addition,] we should also have a general understanding of its history and how the Buddha's teachings transmitted to China from India. Only when we have gained an overview of the Buddha-dharma can we progress and investigate deeper. If we begin our investigation with an arbitrary understanding or with a focus on the *sūtras* and treatises that are for the advanced levels, then we will either lack understanding of the essentials, or give up our studies due to difficulty in comprehending the teachings. That is why we have to first understand the overview of the Buddha-dharma so that we can understand the essentials of the Buddha's teachings in general.

The second phase is to select one school or one division for further investigation, after we have gained an understanding of the core elements of the different schools' doctrines in the Buddha-dharma. This method should also be applied to studies in the ideology of one whole school or a subdivision. For example, if we are interested in studying the Consciousness-only doctrine, we should not begin our investigations with the [advanced] texts such as the *Discourse on the Complete Attainment of Consciousness-only* because there is no way for beginners to understand it. We must start with the texts such as the *Treatises on One Hundred Dharmas* and the *Treatise on the Analysis of the Middle and the Extremes* to gain an overall understanding and then investigate [the doctrine] further. If we are interested in studying the Tiantai school's doctrine, we should first read the texts such as the *Essence of Tiantai School's Doctrine on Theory and Practice* and *The Four Methods and Doctrines Summarised by the Tiantai School*. Only afterwards should we study their three essential great texts and the like. Nevertheless, there are some who do not follow this manner to study and practice the Buddha-dharma. They listen to the *sūtras* and study the teachings by attending someone's talks when the events are available. These learners lack understanding on the foundations of the Buddha-dharma but soon surprisingly become specialists in [the study of] a particular school's doctrine, and even monastic masters [on that subject]. They understand nothing about other schools and naturally think that the school's doctrine they are studying is the best while all other schools' doctrines cannot compare to the one they study. Actually, [it is not proper to make judgement when] they

know nothing about the other schools' doctrines. Such cases, where one begins with a sole focus on one school's doctrine, will certainly result in many flaws. Selective learning is flawed; broad-based learning is wise. If we first acquire a general understanding of the various schools' doctrines, and also have a good understanding about the fundamental teachings such as the Triple Gem, four noble truths, dependent co-arising, and emptiness, then we will not develop biased views when seeking to investigate a particular practice in depth.

The third is being able to see the coherence among different teachings after becoming proficient in a certain practice. Take those who specialize in the Consciousness-only school's doctrine, for example. Initially, they should equip themselves with some understanding of the main tenets of the other schools' doctrines. Based on the position of the Consciousness-only school, they should further analyze the differences between the Consciousness-only school's doctrine and the other schools' doctrines, and try to see the coherence among the different teachings. In this way they will also deepen their understanding of the Buddha-dharma. This method of study applies to not only the various schools' doctrines within the *Mahāyāna*, but also between the *Mahāyāna* and *Śrāvakayāna*. For the sake of teaching and guiding sentient beings in this world, once we have established right understanding of the Buddha-dharma, we should also acquire some knowledge regarding worldly subjects. In this world there are also many wholesome practices and principles [other than the Buddha-dharma]. However, they are not perfect and pure as they still contain some degree of errors. [In terms of these worldly practices,] we should adopt the wholesome factors to become a part of the Buddhist path and expel the erroneous factors according to the truths in the Buddha's teachings.

When studying and practicing the Buddha-dharma, the first step is to grasp the general tenets of the Buddha-dharma through gaining an overview of the Buddha's teachings. Never start our studies of the Buddha-dharma by focusing on a particular *sūtra* or treatise, and assume that we are delving into in-depth analysis of the Buddha-dharma. In fact, this just leads one to tunnel vision, which may be in-depth but one cannot see the coherence between other subjects [and what one studies]. So, we should take grasping the general tenets of the Buddha-dharma as the first step of studying and practicing the Buddha-dharma, and encourage others to follow this approach. We must not pander to those who are over-ambitious and yet have weak spiritual capacity by especially luring them with advanced, difficult and abstruse [teachings].

Three Entrances for Beginners

People beginning their practice of the Buddha-dharma can be classified into three types. This is because people have different spiritual capacities and, based on their motivations for studying the Buddha-dharma, there are three skilful entrances through which they enter the Buddha-dharma. Both the *Śrāvakayāna* and *Mahāyāna* teachings indicate that there are two entrances for practitioners. In the *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, there are two kinds of entrances, and when these two sets of two entrances are combined, there are three types of entrances for three different spiritual capacities of practitioners.

Two Entrances for Practitioners		Three Entrances per <i>Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom</i>
<i>Śrāvakayāna</i> practitioners	Faith-based practitioners	Entrance through faith (diligence)
	Dharma-based practitioners	Entrance through wisdom
<i>Mahāyāna</i> practitioners	Wisdom-based practitioners	Entrance through wisdom
	Compassion-based practitioners	Entrance through compassion

[As shown in the table above,] Dharma-based practitioners correspond to wisdom-based practitioners.

Entrance Through Faith

There is one type of practitioner that is grounded in faith. These practitioners are unable to investigate [the Dharma] deeply on their own accord, and make firm conclusions. For this type of practitioner, as long as someone gives them instructions they are able to practice accordingly without any doubts. For such practitioners, if they meet a good spiritual guide then all is well; otherwise [if they meet bad teachers] they will be in big trouble.

Entrance Through Wisdom

For those practitioners who are grounded in wisdom, the situation is different. They want to observe and investigate everything for themselves, and do not easily adopt what others say and then follow indiscriminately. This applies to what they hear from lectures, or from their own reading. They always question why, and have to contemplate and examine things to determine if it is trustworthy. That is to say, this type of practitioner does not easily accept what others or sages say.

[To sum up,] the former type of practitioners is inclined towards faith and the latter type is inclined towards wisdom. Faith-based and wisdom-based practitioners are only inclined towards faith or wisdom; this does not mean that they have faith and no wisdom or wisdom and no faith. A well-rounded Buddhist practitioner must develop both faith and wisdom. The wisdom-based bodhisattvas of the *Mahāyāna* place emphasis on wisdom. When they initiate their aspiration [for bodhi] the focus is on investigating and finding the truth of all phenomena. In other words, they place emphasis on attaining awakening for themselves first.

Entrance Through Compassion

The last type [of *Mahāyāna* practitioner] is compassion-based. Their spirit of serving others and sacrificing themselves for others' benefit is especially strong. They have great loving kindness and compassion, and focus more on beneficial deeds such as charity work and politics. Nevertheless, references to wisdom-based and compassion-based [bodhisattvas] merely reflect

what they focus on first, and it certainly does not mean that one has wisdom and no compassion while the other has compassion and no wisdom.

According to the true meaning of the Buddha-dharma, a well-rounded model Buddhist practitioner must be equipped with all three qualities of faith, wisdom, and compassion. If Buddhist practitioners lack any one of these qualities, then they are not well-rounded and can easily go astray. That is why it is said in the *Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣā* and the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, “If one only has faith without wisdom, ignorance grows and increases; if one has only wisdom without faith, erroneous views develop and increase.”

[This saying means that] if one only emphasizes faith and lacks wisdom when practicing the Buddha-dharma, their ignorance grows in the sense that they are unable to distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad. Consequently, they simply believe whatever they hear. In modern terms this means, “If one has faith without wisdom, superstition develops.” We can see this situation in the form of the inclusion of non-Buddhist teachings into Buddhist Dharma talks. Is this not a result of having faith and no wisdom, and so there is no ability to discern what is found in the Dharma and what is not? And then there are some Buddhist preachers who teach only about faith in the buddhas, bodhisattvas, miracles, supernatural powers and so on, and, over time, this increases their followers’ ignorance as they study Buddhism. They then are similar to non-Buddhist practitioners.

In the case where someone merely focuses on wisdom and lacks faith, they will fall into the situation where erroneous views develop and increase. This is because, when lacking faith, although Buddhists spend all their time investigating the Dharma, what they develop will be erroneous views and understanding. In the end, they no longer believe in the Buddha and Dharma. In other words, for them there is nothing worth believing in. This situation is too common among the younger generation of Buddhist researchers in modern times.

The same also applies to the case between wisdom-based and compassion-based practitioners of *Mahāyāna*. If wisdom-based practitioners lack compassion and only attend to their own liberation from cyclic existence, in actual fact they lack the spirit of the *Mahāyāna* although they constantly say that they practice the *Mahāyāna*. Even if they possess the qualities of faith and wisdom, due to their eagerness to seek self-enlightenment, inevitably they will attain the *Śrāvakayāna* goal. As for the compassion-based practitioners, if they neglect the wisdom aspect of the Buddha-dharma and only focus on altruism, then at times they cannot fulfil their bodhisattva aspiration, or easily become disheartened when the environment turns hostile. These practitioners become so-called “failed bodhisattvas,” as described in the Buddha-dharma. Such bodhisattvas are those who regress and lose heart partway through their practice.

Each person’s spiritual capacity for learning the Buddha-dharma is different, and there cannot be only one entrance to the Buddha-dharma. For beginners, it is unavoidable that they will have different emphasis on faith, wisdom, or compassion. However, if they only focus on one aspect [and neglect the others] then they will definitely fail and not succeed. With respect to the situation in Chinese Buddhism, most followers tend to focus on faith and have less interest in undertaking altruistic affairs. Under the veil of superstition in China, the Chinese Buddhism

that focuses more on supernatural miracles or offering food to ghosts has become distorted (that is, inclined to rely on external powers), and is closer to polytheism and even shamanism! The reality is that faith in the Triple Gem means to regard the buddhas and bodhisattvas as wise spiritual guides that bring about wisdom. As for ending the cycle of life and death, attaining liberation, accumulating merits and virtues, and realizing bodhi, all of these matters must come from our own efforts.

Here, we are studying the Buddha-dharma, and this is the way that one enters the Buddha-dharma through wisdom. However, we must also nurture faith and compassion at the same time. Please always remember that the virtues of the Triple Gem are unfathomable [and so we need faith]; many beings are in suffering [and so we must have compassion]. If we aspire to bear the responsibility of maintaining the righteous Dharma and freeing sentient beings from suffering, we must develop faith, compassion, and wisdom altogether, rather than only developing wisdom.