

# Synopsis on the Practice of Wisdom in Buddhism

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# **1. The Quintessence of the Buddha's Dharma is the Practice of Wisdom**

## **The Three Essentials Must be Collectively Embodied and Accomplished**

The Buddha-dharma is as deep as the ocean, and boundless without limits. Yet its core practice is no other than the three essentials of faith and aspiration, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom. All the other various practices within the Buddha-dharma are practices derived from the three essentials, or further developed practices that lead to deeper cultivation of the three essentials, or related practices of the three essentials. Therefore, when studying and practicing the Buddha's teachings, the three essentials must be properly undertaken such that they are mutually nurturing and there are no deficiencies in any of the essentials. Only then will their perfection be achieved.

For beginners, due to differences in spiritual foundation and interest, it is unavoidable there will be more focus on one particular essential. However, this should not occur beyond the initial stage. In order to progress in the study and practice of the Buddha-dharma, perfecting all three essentials is the ultimate goal.

## **Only Wisdom Fully Reflects the Unique Quality of Buddhism**

Notwithstanding the requirement to perfect all three essentials, among all religious practices, the one feature that can fully represent the unique quality of Buddhism is wisdom. In other words, wisdom is the superior quality that Buddhism possesses over all other religions. Accordingly, Buddhism is a rational religion. With regard to any religion in this world, we cannot say that it has no element of wisdom. It is just that the focus of many religions is the expression of faith or compassion.

Only in the religions of India do we find an emphasis on wisdom as well as on the elements of faith and compassion. Therefore, in general, the religions of India possess both religious and philosophical elements. Buddhism is one of the Indian religions rising from such a religious culture, and thus naturally the element of wisdom is also stressed. Nonetheless, according to the Buddha's teachings,<sup>1</sup> the enlightenment achieved by the other Indian religions cannot be the complete accomplishment of true wisdom. Although the practitioners of the other Indian religions may experience excellent spiritual states or develop their experiences into profound metaphysical philosophies,<sup>2</sup> these are still the achievements of the worldly virtue of meditation.

Before the Buddha attained Buddhahood, he studied under the renowned teachers of that time, such as Ārāḍa-Kālāma. These teachers believed that what they had realized was the ultimate

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<sup>1</sup> The Buddha had studied under different masters of his era, and upon mastering their teachings, he realized that they were still inadequate for the purpose of full liberation.

<sup>2</sup> Metaphysical philosophies refer to theories and ideas relating to the very first cause of all things, the ultimate first source or origin of things.

state of nirvana. However, according to the Buddha's assessment, their realizations were merely the deep meditative states of "no perception" and "neither perception nor non-perception."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, these teachers still suffer from the cycle of life and death within the three realms.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, although other religions may be able to eliminate a portion of defilement (and, in some cases, this may be a large portion) and acquire an extremely profound and sublime state of freedom that resembles the state of liberation, they remain unable to remove the root of the problem because of a lack of true insight or wisdom. When the strength and influence of the meditative state diminishes, countless defilements begin to arise again, just like the common [Chinese] saying "Wild fires cannot kill off all vegetation; once the spring breeze comes flowing, they grow again."

Buddhism became established as a religion because the states of meditation attained transcended that of other religions and because it emphasized living life with wisdom. For those of us who are learning and practicing the Buddha's teachings, if we are unable to fully grasp this core aspect of Buddhism—for example, if we overemphasize faith or compassion or if we purely focus on meditation—then we have lost the unique quality of Buddhism. Although all these practices of faith, compassion and meditation are compulsory parts of Buddhist practice, if we neglect the cultivation of wisdom, we are unable to present the unique, unsurpassed and ultimate quality of Buddhism.

## **2. Only the Practice of Wisdom Can Lead to the Accomplishment of the Sublime and Profound States in Buddhism**

The full spectrum of Buddhist practices is extremely vast, ranging from the basic to the profound and from the small to the great. However, it is mainly the practice of wisdom that surpasses all other worldly religions and philosophies.

In relation to the *Śrāvākayāna* practice,<sup>5</sup> there are the three progressive trainings. If we add the stage of liberation, four stages in total make up the whole structure of the *Śrāvākayāna* practice. [The three progressive trainings are so named because] with a solid foundation in the training of precepts, the practice of right meditation can be achieved. With the attainment of right meditation, wisdom can be developed. Once true wisdom arises, liberation is attained. The

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<sup>3</sup> The meditative state of "no perception" is the cause for attaining rebirth in the Heaven of No Perception, belonging to the Form Realm. The meditative state of "neither perception nor non-perception" is the deepest meditative state, which can lead to rebirth in the highest heaven in the Formless Realm. In both these states and heavens, the mind's consciousness is said to be virtually inactive.

<sup>4</sup> The three realms in Buddhism refer to the Desire Realm, Form Realm and Formless Realm. Humans exist in the realm of desire, which is characterized by the existence of desire and craving, especially the craving for food, sleep and desire for intimacy. That means all beings in the realm of desire possess these characteristics to a greater or lesser extent. The Form Realm and Formless Realm are characterized by the possession of meditative concentration. In the realm of form there is still a physical body while in the Formless Realm the teachings do not talk about a physical body, only a consciousness. In these upper two realms, the desires that are typical of the Desire Realm no longer arise and meditative power is the main source supporting one's existence. In Buddhism, liberation means to be fully liberated from the bonds of these three realms.

<sup>5</sup> *Śrāvākayāna* refers to the *śrāvaka* practice. These practitioners listen to and learn from the Buddha and his teachings to attain the liberation of an arhat. In the present day, this vehicle is synonymous with the Theravada practice.

sequence of the three progressive trainings is like steps that are interdependent, and none can be omitted. However, the quintessential link that is truly able to lead sentient beings to the state of liberation is wisdom.

Now, regarding the *Mahāyāna* practice, the main structure is based on the six *pāramitās*. First, with the *pāramitās* of generosity, morality, endurance and perseverance, we extensively accumulate all the prerequisites of virtues and merits. Then, with the *pāramitā* of meditation, the *pāramitā* of *prajñā*<sup>6</sup> can be attained, which allows the goal of the *Mahāyāna* to be achieved and all defilement and cyclic existence can be brought to an end. Hence in the *Mahāyāna* texts, we find this common praise: through numerous eons, one may undertake countless practices, but this cannot compare to an instance of correctly contemplating, accepting, bearing in mind and adhering to a few words that present just a single concept from the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*.

Therefore, we can clearly see that despite whether we take the *Mahāyāna* or the *Śrāvakayāna* perspective, if the aim is to end cyclic existence, eliminate all defilements, and realize the truth, this can only be accomplished with the power of wisdom. However, this is not to say that everything apart from wisdom can be ignored. Rather, it means that in the process of eliminating defilements and awakening to the truth, the practice of wisdom cannot be deficient or omitted. In fact, the practice of wisdom is the most important practice throughout the process of cultivation, from start to finish. With wisdom, the profound and sublime state of the Buddha-dharma can be attained.<sup>7</sup> All the methods of cultivation that can yield liberation have the practice of wisdom as their core, and this is a fundamental principle with no exceptions.

### 3. The True Meaning of Initiating Wisdom with Meditation

At this point, there is an important issue to note. Within the *Śrāvakayāna* practices, there is a separate progressive training of wisdom, distinct from the progressive training of meditation. Within the *Mahāyāna* practices, after the *pāramitā* of meditation, there is another *pāramitā* of *prajñā*. Therefore, from the perspective of a beginner on the path, undertaking the practice consists of tranquility<sup>8</sup> and the practice of insight.<sup>9</sup> The practice of meditation forms the foundation for the practice of wisdom, but the practice of wisdom is not the same as meditation. Therefore, we need to pay careful attention to developing our understanding and practice of wisdom. At the same time, we must not neglect the methods for cultivating tranquility.

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<sup>6</sup> *Prajñā* is a Sanskrit word that is often translated as wisdom. In the Buddhist context, it is usually referring to the type of wisdom that can lead to the realization of the ultimate truth. The word *pāramitā* has the meaning of “going to the opposite shore”, “complete attainment”, “transcendental virtue”. So the six *pāramitās* should be understood as relying on the virtues of generosity, morality, endurance, perseverance, meditation and wisdom to go from the shore of cyclic existence to the opposite shore of perfect liberation.

<sup>7</sup> Here, the profound and sublime state of Buddha-dharma refers to the attainment of ending cyclic existence, purifying all defilements and realizing the truth—in other words, the attainment of nirvana.

<sup>8</sup> The attainment of tranquility is the aim of practicing calming meditation in Buddhism.

<sup>9</sup> The practice of insight refers to the investigative meditation practice with the aim of cultivating wisdom, which is only possible after attaining tranquility and by using tranquility as the foundation.

Some people think that the saying “relying on tranquility<sup>10</sup> to initiate wisdom” means that if tranquility is attained, wisdom will naturally arise. This is a complete misunderstanding of the meaning behind the Buddhist ideal of practice and realization. Similarly, when we say “rely on morality to attain tranquility,” do you think it means that by upholding the precepts purely, tranquility will be attained? Of course this is not the case. Specific practices are required in order to attain tranquility. Similarly, according to the true meaning of the Buddha’s teachings, the attainment of tranquility does not automatically give rise to wisdom. Rather, we rely on the power of tranquility, and with a mind that is tranquil we then practice insight. Only in this way can true wisdom that is beyond worldly knowledge be initiated. Based on this true meaning, when the teaching says to rely on tranquility to initiate wisdom, it does not mean that once tranquility is attained, wisdom will arise automatically. Otherwise, why is it that, unlike the sages in Buddhism, other spiritual practitioners who have also attained various states of meditation still lack the true wisdom required to end their defilements and gain liberation?

Hence we need to understand that based on the underlying principle of studying and practicing the Buddha’s teachings, we should extensively undertake all dharma practices, and among these various dharma practices, only the practice of wisdom is able to guide us directly to reach the profound state of Buddhism.<sup>11</sup>

#### **4. Only with the Practice of Wisdom can One Become a Sage**

In the practice of Buddhism, although there are many methods to suit different practitioners, the crucial element that determines whether a worldly being can become a sage is the possession of true wisdom. Therefore, wisdom can certainly be regarded as the unique quality of the sages. Commonly, it is considered there are ten categories of beings, of whom six are worldly and four are sages. The division between worldly beings and sages is marked by whether they are awakened or unawakened (deluded). That is, with awakening, one becomes a sage; without awakening, one remains a worldly being.

[This quality of wisdom can be seen in the titles given to the sages.] Take, for example, the epithet “buddha”; its meaning is the awakened one. This means one who has awakened to the truth of the universe and life and who fully knows all aspects of each dharma. Because the Buddha has this perfect wisdom encompassing full awakening and knowing, he is called the awakened one. Every buddha is also given the epithets “one who understands the world,” and “one who has completely and perfectly awakened.” A buddha ultimately attains what is described as unsurpassed complete and perfect awakening. No matter whether we consider a buddha from the perspective of his title or his attainment (the title is actually based on the attainment), the core basis lies in his wisdom of enlightenment.

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<sup>10</sup> In Chinese there is the saying, “rely on morality to achieve concentration, rely on concentration to achieve wisdom (依戒起定，依定發慧)”. Meditation includes many stages and brings the mind to many different states. Here the term meditation is replaced with tranquility in the saying as it refers to the state of tranquility—*śamatha*.

<sup>11</sup> Here the profound state of Buddhism refers to nirvana (see Footnote 7).

Not only is this true for buddhas but also for bodhisattvas and the sages of the two-vehicle.<sup>12</sup> Their epithets are also inseparable from the wisdom of enlightenment. The term “bodhisattva” comes from “*bodhi*” and “*sattva*,” which mean “awakening” and “sentient being” respectively. This compound word can be interpreted as a sentient being that has awakened. This agrees with what Nāgārjuna said: “One who possesses some wisdom<sup>13</sup> is called a bodhisattva.” The term *pratyekabuddha* in the two-vehicle means “solitary awakened one” or “one who attains awakening through contemplating dependent origination.” As for the title of *śrāvaka*, this means one who attains awakening from listening to the Buddha’s teachings.

All four categories of sages—the buddhas, bodhisattvas, *pratyekabuddhas* and *śrāvakas*—become sages on account of attaining wisdom. Therefore, the name for each of these four categories of sages is inseparable from the meaning of awakening—the only difference is the level of wisdom each has attained.

## 5. Wisdom is the Foundation of All Virtues

The wisdom that constitutes the unique quality of Buddhism is not like an abstract knowledge, nor is it a dry and unsympathetic rationality. Instead, it is the true wisdom that arises from the unification of and balance between<sup>14</sup> compassion and wisdom. Throughout the course of one’s practice, wisdom is essential. Regardless of whether the aim is to attain enlightenment for oneself or to enlighten others, wisdom is always required as the guide. This is particularly so for the bodhisattvas undertaking the *Mahāyāna*. In order to benefit all sentient beings, bodhisattvas especially need to rely on countless skillful methods.

Therefore, in the *sūtras*, wisdom is highly esteemed, just like Mount Sumeru [is the greatest] among all mountain peaks, or like the *cakravatin* [is the greatest] among all kings.<sup>15</sup> This means that wisdom is the foremost among all virtues and central to all virtues. In the *Mahāyāna sūtras*, it is said that “by relying on *prajñāpāramitā*, inconceivable, limitless, countless and boundless virtues are drawn together and guided toward the ocean of the Buddha’s wisdom until one becomes immersed in it.” Within the *śrāvaka* teachings, it is said that “knowledge (wisdom) is the root of all wholesomeness.” It is often highlighted in Buddhist teachings that wisdom is the root of all virtues and that for perfect realization to occur, wisdom must become ultimate and perfect. Among all the various dharma practices, wisdom is the foundation of all sages, and we

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<sup>12</sup> Two-vehicle refers to the practitioners of the *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* paths. When the bodhisattva path is added, collectively they are referred to as the three-vehicle.

<sup>13</sup> “Wisdom” here refers to true wisdom. It is progressively attained by bodhisattvas, and only buddhas possess true wisdom that is perfect.

<sup>14</sup> Here the Chinese text has the term “理性,” which is commonly translated as “rational.” Sometimes Venerable Yinshun uses “理性” to mean “principle” or “truth.” However, in this sentence, Venerable Yinshun’s use of this term is likely to reflect how compassion and wisdom merge; hence our translation uses “balance between” to reflect the rational aspect.

<sup>15</sup> Mount Sumeru is a mountain in the Buddhist cosmology that is said to exist at the center of the cosmos. It is considered to be the tallest mountain; so high that its peak crosses over into the lower heavenly realms. The mountain is said to be golden in color. The world we humans live in is situated at the southern side of the mountain’s base. Cakravatin refers to a universal ruler who governs over the world with ethics and benevolence. During a *cakravatin*’s rule the world is peaceful, prosperous and free from all sorts of calamities. These two concepts of Mount Sumeru and the cakravatin are found in other Indian religions as well.

should especially revere it and strive for it.

## 6. The Various Terms for Wisdom

In both the *Mahāyāna* and *Śrāvakayāna* texts, various terms are used to refer to wisdom. Most commonly seen is the term *prajñā* (慧).<sup>16</sup> In addition are the terms *vipaśyanā* (觀),<sup>17</sup> thorough understanding (忍),<sup>18</sup> view (見),<sup>19</sup> knowing (智),<sup>20</sup> skillfulness (方便),<sup>21</sup> light (光),<sup>22</sup> higher knowledge (明),<sup>23</sup> awakening (覺),<sup>24</sup> and so forth. In the thirty-seven practices conducive to enlightenment, there are right view (正見),<sup>25</sup> right contemplation (正思惟),<sup>26</sup> discernment (擇法),<sup>27</sup> and so forth. Generally speaking, these are all synonyms for wisdom. Although the underlying essence of each of these terms does not differ greatly, in the teachings of the Buddha-dharma each of these terms does have its specific meaning.

### *Prajñā* (Wisdom), *Jñāna* (Knowing), and *Vipaśyanā* (Insight)

Among all the terms for wisdom, three are especially important: *prajñā* (wisdom), *jñāna* (knowing) and *vipaśyanā* (insight). These three terms for wisdom share common meanings; they also have their unique meanings, which are more distinct than other terms. Of course, the nature of their true essence remains identical.

The term *prajñā*, when compared with other synonyms, can be said to be the most respected, and its meaning is also the most profound and far-reaching. The term *prajñā* is used to refer to all causal practices of wisdom when a practitioner is still on the path. After attaining the goal of ultimate perfection, the term *prajñā* converts to *sarvajñā* (all-knowing, 一切智),<sup>28</sup> or bodhi (awakening, 覺). Therefore this transformation is interpreted by Kumārajīva as “*sarvajñā* is the name of *prajñā* that has matured.” *Prajñā* represents the wisdom in the causal stage where a practitioner is still learning and practicing. As for the terms “knowing” and “bodhi,” et cetera, these refer to the resultant *prajñā* that perfectly realizes the truth.

Now let us look at the meaning of *prajñā* and *vipaśyanā*. *Prajñā* has the nature of investigation. The function of this nature in the beginning stage is called *vipaśyanā*. At the start, the wisdom

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<sup>16</sup> *Prajñā* (Sanskrit), *paññā* (Pali).

<sup>17</sup> *Vipaśyanā* (Sanskrit), *vipassanā* (Pali).

<sup>18</sup> *Kṣānti* (Sanskrit), *khanti* (Pali). *Kṣānti* is usually understood as patience, forbearance, and endurance. However, in the Buddhist context it also refers to the quality of wisdom.

<sup>19</sup> *Darśana* (Sanskrit), *dassana* (Pali).

<sup>20</sup> *Jñāna* (Sanskrit), *ñāṇa* (Pali).

<sup>21</sup> *Upāya* (Sanskrit and Pali).

<sup>22</sup> *Āloka* (Sanskrit and Pali).

<sup>23</sup> *Vidyā* (Sanskrit), *vijjā* (Pali).

<sup>24</sup> Bodhi (Sanskrit and Pali).

<sup>25</sup> *Samyagdr̥ṣṭi* (Sanskrit), *sammādiṭṭhi* (Pali).

<sup>26</sup> *Samyaksamkalpa* (Sanskrit), *sammāsaṅkappa* (Pali).

<sup>27</sup> *Dharmavicaya* (Sanskrit), *dhammavicaya* (Pali).

<sup>28</sup> Here, *sarvajñā* corresponds to *jñāna*. Venerable Yinshun observed that when the word *jñāna* is used in relation to the perfection of wisdom, it is commonly paired with the adjective *sarva* to become *sarvajñā*. *Sarvajñā* is used to represent ultimate perfect wisdom that is all-knowing.

that practitioners cultivate is referred to as *vipaśyanā*. After *vipaśyanā* is accomplished, this wisdom is then called *prajñā*. The purpose in using these different terms to refer to wisdom is to differentiate between the various levels of practice with regard to duration and depth. Therefore, in this context, the terms *prajñā* and *vipaśyanā* basically have the same meaning and nature and can be used to refer to wisdom in all stages of the practice. So if we want to understand the essence of *prajñā*, then we must not neglect the meaning of *vipaśyanā*.

With regard to the meaning of *vipaśyanā*, the Buddha explained it to Maitreya as “the ability to differentiate, thoroughly differentiate, thoroughly investigate, thoroughly analyze, understand, interest, wisdom, view, and insight. All these are used to explain the meaning of *vipaśyanā*.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, the function of *vipaśyanā* includes distinguishing, analyzing, investigating, deciding, and so on. All of these can also be applied to *prajñā*. Therefore, *prajñā* is said to be “the nature of investigating the object of focus.”

When cultivating *vipaśyanā*, we should not only seek to know clearly the object of focus but also develop our ability to postulate, discern, analyze, et cetera. Accordingly, in the case where the object of focus relates to worldly phenomena, the ability to postulate, discern, and analyze is required [in order to develop different levels of wisdom<sup>30</sup>]. In the case where the object of focus relates to the ultimate truth, the ability to analyze, investigate, et cetera, is also required in order to experience and fully comprehend that all phenomena are ultimately empty in nature. This requirement is essential because these abilities—analysis, discernment, etcetera—are the unique qualities of *vipaśyanā*.

In the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, there are teachings about the eighteen types of emptiness, which in essence are various methods for investigating the nature of no intrinsic existence in all phenomena. When the cultivation of *vipaśyanā* is complete, it is called *prajñā*. Therefore, traditionally it is said that “prior to accomplishment, *vipaśyanā* is the insight meditation on emptiness, and after accomplishment it is called *prajñā*.”

Therefore, if a practitioner of the Buddha-dharma thinks from the start that the way to nondiscrimination is to not differentiate and thus fails to perform analysis and discernment in order to properly understand phenomena and the teachings, they will never be able to attain the perfection of wisdom. All they will be cultivating are the states of tranquility.

## 7. The Ultimate Characteristic of Wisdom

When embarking on the cultivation of wisdom, essentially we should have as our final goal the ultimate and perfect wisdom. Initially, we should have a good general understanding of the characteristics of true wisdom. Without this understanding, our causal practices cannot properly align with the ultimate goal, and this will make it impossible to attain the perfect and

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<sup>29</sup> This explanation to Maitreya can be found in the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* (解深密經), which has been translated into English by John Powers and John P. Keenan. Powers’ translation is titled *Wisdom of Buddha: The Samdhinirmocana Mahāyāna Sūtra* and this quote can be found in Chapter 8. Keenan’s translation is titled *The Scripture on the Explication of Underlying Meaning* and the quote can be found in Chapter 6.

<sup>30</sup> See section 10. Progression in the Cultivation of Wisdom.

ultimate fruition. The wisdom that is being discussed here refers to true wisdom, which ranges from the partial awakening of the bodhisattvas to the perfect awakening of the buddhas.

Regarding the *Mahāyāna*'s teachings on the cultivation of wisdom, Nāgārjuna at one time analyzed and discussed it further. He said that *prajñā* is unlike what the heretics describe, which merely enables them to depart this present world and be reborn in a better realm. Nor is it the same wisdom attained by the two-vehicles, which is strongly inclined to the realization of the truth and lacks great compassion.<sup>31</sup> Even though, in a broad sense, the wisdom of heretics and the two-vehicle may contain some elements connected with *prajñā*, these types of wisdom cannot ultimately become the perfect wisdom of the *Mahāyāna*. The ultimate characteristic of the true and perfect wisdom attained by *Mahāyāna* practitioners can be understood through the following four aspects.

First is that faith and wisdom function as one. When we talk about wisdom, it is not completely unrelated to faith. Generally, at the start, a practitioner who is on the right path must rely on faith to develop wisdom. Subsequently, they apply wisdom to further strengthen their faith. Thus, the two are interrelated and mutually supportive and they progress hand in hand until they finally function as one. This marks the accomplishment of true wisdom.

At the start, some *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners may be inclined to faith (faith-based practitioners) whereas others are inclined to wisdom (dharma-based practitioners).<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, once they have attained enlightenment, both kinds of practitioners have pure and true faith in the Buddha, dharma, *saṃgha*, and noble precepts—four aspects of realized faith. This is the *Śrāvakayāna*'s state, where faith and wisdom function as one. This state is where pure faith is attained, which in fact is the attainment of true wisdom, the true wisdom that has realized the truth.

The bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, as described in the *Mahāyāna sūtras*, is representative of great wisdom. Mañjuśrī not only expounds and reveals the profound meaning of the true nature of all phenomena but also emphasizes the importance of developing faith in the *Mahāyāna* and making the bodhi vow to attain Buddhahood. This is why Mañjuśrī is called the teacher of the buddhas. Mañjuśrī's practice shows that one should make the bodhi vow (right faith in the *Mahāyāna*) and cultivate wisdom to strengthen that vow. Only in this way can great bodhi be attained. This great bodhi is the state where faith and wisdom function as one in the *Mahāyāna*.

Second is the merging of compassion and wisdom. True *prajñā* is also where extensive compassion and profound wisdom merge as one. Therefore, the wisdom of the *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners, which is biased toward the truth, cannot reflect the full meaning of Buddhism.

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<sup>31</sup> In terms of the two-vehicle practitioners, when they are said to be lacking in great compassion, this does not mean they have no compassion at all. Although they have compassion, from the *Mahāyāna*'s perspective their compassion is not as deep and great as the bodhisattvas.

<sup>32</sup> Faith-based practitioners tend to undertake practices that are more faith orientated, such as the six recollections of the Buddha, dharma, *saṃgha*, precepts, generosity, and the heavens. Dharma-based practitioners are inclined towards practices that focus on developing wisdom and understanding of the dharma, an example is the four factors for entry into sagehood (四預流支): associating with spiritual guides (親近善士), learning the righteous dharma (聽聞正法), contemplating the dharma properly and thoroughly (如理作意), practicing the noble eightfold path for the sake of nirvana (法隨法行).

That is, because they heavily focus on experiencing life rationally<sup>33</sup> and their compassion is insufficiently developed, after attaining the final liberation it is difficult for them to make great vows that focus on tirelessly working to liberate sentient beings and accomplish countless virtuous practices.

However, only the bodhisattvas can attain true *prajñā* because they also possess deep sympathy and great vows to practice compassion when they thoroughly awaken to the nature of all dharmas. Thereafter, as [they engage in benefiting sentient beings and] their loving kindness and compassion becomes more widespread, their wisdom becomes more profound.

In the *Mahāyāna sūtras*, it is said that when bodhisattvas' compassion and compassionate deeds are insufficient and they eagerly seek the wisdom of enlightenment, the majority of them will fall into the trap of self-liberation [that is, they gain only the fruition of the *Śrāvakayāna*]. In such circumstances, they have forgotten the underlying meaning of the *Mahāyāna*'s teachings on *prajñā*, which emphasizes the union of wisdom and compassion, and have created obstacles to their progression on the path to Buddhahood.

Third is the balance between tranquility and wisdom. When cultivating the *Mahāyāna* practices, if practitioners are biased toward meditation such that their power of tranquility is strong and wisdom is weak or if they are biased toward wisdom such that their wisdom is strong but their tranquility is weak, they will be unable to realize the profound nature of all dharmas and will be unable to accomplish true wisdom. This is because when the wisdom of differentiation and selection is strong and tranquility is insufficient, it is like a candle in the wind. Even though the light can illuminate, it flickers and can be extinguished easily. This is like the case of Venerable Ānanda. Although he is honored as foremost in learning the dharma, when the Buddha entered *parinirvāṇa*, Venerable Ānanda had yet to attain Arhatship. This is because he focused on the wisdom of learning but had a weak foundation in meditation.

However, if practitioners' tranquility is strong and their strength of wisdom is weak, they are not on the right path of Buddhist practice. This is because deep meditation can give rise to a unique form of stillness that results in an extremely sublime experience where the body and mind is filled with a sense of freedom, bliss, rapture, and joy. While experiencing such a wonderful state, they can easily become enchanted and contented, thus creating an obstacle to seeking and attaining wisdom. Hence the *sūtras* and exegesis always mention that the deepest state of worldly meditation does not accord with wisdom and is unable to bring forth

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<sup>33</sup> Experiencing life rationally can be highlighted from the following example. If a *Śrāvakayāna* practitioner sees people arguing, they would reflect rationally and conclude this is suffering, just as the Buddha taught. Their first reaction is less likely to contemplate how they could help to resolve the argument and bring happiness to all parties. This is the intended meaning of “experiencing life rationally.”

awakening.<sup>34</sup> Nāgārjuna says that bodhisattvas of the seventh *bhūmi*,<sup>35</sup> which is “called the stage of equilibrium between tranquility and wisdom,” have meditation and wisdom that is balanced, and only then do they attain thorough understanding of the truth regarding nonorigination. At this point, they can penetrate deeply into the truth and will no longer regress from the *Mahāyāna*.

Fourth is sameness of truth and wisdom is realized. When a practitioner attains the wisdom that engenders the realization of the profound truth relating to the nature of all dharmas, this is the arising of true wisdom. This state is conventionally described in terms of the duality of subject and object, where the subject is the wisdom that can bring about realization, and the object is the truth that is to be realized. However, when one experiences this state, where true wisdom awakens to the truth, they actually transcend duality.

Therefore, when a practitioner’s true wisdom awakens to the truth, the practitioner realizes the sameness of the truth and wisdom; the two become indistinguishable and inseparable. As said in the *sūtras* [in the state of realization], “there is no wisdom as subject that realizes the truth, and no truth as the object to be realized.”

### **The Merging of Compassion and Wisdom is Unique to the *Mahāyāna***

The above four aspects are the manifestation of true wisdom. Among them, the union of faith and wisdom, the balance between meditation and wisdom, and realization of the sameness of the truth and wisdom are common to the wisdom of the two-vehicles that are inclined toward the truth. Only the *Mahāyāna prajñā* has the unique aspect of the merging of compassion and wisdom.

The *Mahāyāna*’s *prajñā* is not an abstract wisdom that distinguishes between things, nor is it inclined toward a lifeless type of rationality. Rather, it possesses faith, compassion, deep tranquility, and profound clarity, and is fully imbued with the vitality of spiritual life. Therefore, the *Mahāyāna* wisdom that can bring about realization of the nature of all dharmas undeniably embodies boundless virtues, such as compassion and diligence. [This is also the case with the *dharmakāya*.] In the *Mahāyāna*, the underlying principle is to rely on this *prajñā* to end defilement and realize the truth, which is to attain the *dharmakāya*. The *dharmakāya* is the nature of boundless wholesome dharmas, or the nature that boundless wholesome dharmas rely on. This means that when *prajñā* realizes the truth, it too is equipped with boundless virtues. Therefore, the situation where a buddha realizes bodhi—that is, his attainment of the ultimate wisdom—is centered on wisdom, yet it includes all pure and wholesome dharmas.

With respect to the study and practice of wisdom, we must understand clearly its unique qualities as well as know that true wisdom must be supported by all virtues. For example, the

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<sup>34</sup> The “deepest state of worldly meditation” refers to the state of “neither perception nor nonperception,” which is generally accepted by the various Indian religions of Buddha’s time to be the deepest state of meditation. This does not preclude some religions claiming to have even deeper states. In Buddhism, there is a deeper state of meditation that is beyond the worldly state, and only enlightened beings can reach this level.

<sup>35</sup> *Bhūmi* is a Sanskrit word which has the meaning of earth, ground, situation. It also has the meaning of a step, degree or stage in a metaphysical sense. It is taught that the final phase of the bodhisattva path consists of ten stages or ten *bhūmis*, which reflect the final ten levels before the attainment of Buddhahood. Bodhisattvas who have attained to these ten stages are extremely advanced practitioners.

scriptures say that *prajñā* embraces and guides all virtuous practices and that all virtuous practices enrich *prajñā*. In other words, at the same time as wisdom is being cultivated, faith, compassion, meditation, and so forth should also be cultivated and accumulated. Only then can true *prajñā* arise.

## 8. Categories of Wisdom

### Wisdom Grouped into Threes

The nature and characteristics of all dharmas are very deep and varied. Therefore, in terms of the wisdom that can penetrate and understand these dharmas, there are different levels and types. [For example, there are different levels of wisdom based on the depth of understanding, and there are different types of wisdom depending on the aspects of phenomena or principle understood.] Here, the most important categories, which are repeatedly indicated in the Buddhist texts, are presented briefly. Wisdom can be considered tripartition, and there are several types of tripartite wisdom.

#### *A. Wisdom Endowed at Birth, Wisdom of Engaged Effort, and True Wisdom*

One of the commonly seen types of tripartite wisdom consists of the wisdom endowed at birth, the wisdom of engaged effort, and true wisdom.<sup>36</sup>

##### *Wisdom Endowed at Birth*

The wisdom that is endowed at birth is innate wisdom. Every person—as it happens, every sentient being—possesses some wisdom. This is because all living sentient beings, as they go about their lives, have to some degree the ability to differentiate and discern things. Let us take humans as an example. No matter whether they are clever or foolish, honorable or disgraceful, in general, everyone is born with the ability to discern what is true and false, acceptable and unacceptable. This ability is the manifestation of wisdom that is endowed at birth. However, this wisdom endowed at birth requires certain subsequent conditions to nurture and support its development in our lives. For example, the education that we receive from our parents and teachers, the cultural influences in our society, even our own life experiences, and so on, are the conditions that help wisdom endowed at birth to develop and expand. Only when these supporting conditions are present can the wisdom endowed at birth in human beings fully develop.

In this world, regardless of which ethnic group we belong to, each person possesses wisdom endowed at birth, so in this respect all humans are equal. However, to advance the

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<sup>36</sup> In the original Chinese text, true wisdom is 無漏慧, which literally means undefiled wisdom or wisdom that is undefiled. In Chinese, the words “defiled” and “undefiled” are added to indicate the state in which something occurs. When the word “undefiled” is used to modify wisdom, it indicates that the practitioner has cut off all afflictions and attained liberation. The adjective of defiled and undefiled may cause confusion for readers so they have been omitted in the English version.

knowledge of people in general, a good education and wholesome environment are needed. The so-called superior and inferior differences between ethnic groups are merely a result of the way in which wisdom endowed at birth has developed as a result of the conditions after birth. When we talk about the function of wisdom that develops after birth, it is merely a matter of whether or not that wisdom is manifest. It is not the case that the essence of that wisdom differs.

When we learn and practice the Buddha's teachings, either from listening to the *sūtras* and dharma teachings or from reading and investigating the teachings, we gain a certain level of understanding regarding the Buddha-dharma. Even if we can then teach about emptiness, existence, the mind, and true nature, or magnificently elaborate on the superior virtues of Buddhahood and its various states of nonobstruction, generally speaking, the type of wisdom that understands and can elaborate on the Buddha's teachings still belongs to the wisdom endowed at birth. This level of wisdom, more or less, is what the ordinary worldly type of wisdom can achieve. In other words, there is little difference between the [initial level of] wisdom based on Buddhist practices and ordinary wisdom based on worldly training. If a Buddhist practitioner remains at this stage, becomes contented with their attainment, and does not endeavor to advance, what they are then able to attain from the Buddha-dharma is merely an ordinary worldly type of wisdom. This is the case even if what they know and understand all relates to the Buddha-dharma.

The first step in the study and practice of the Buddha-dharma is to use our wisdom endowed at birth as a means to understanding the Buddha-dharma. Using our wisdom endowed at birth is a preliminary measure to enter the vast ocean of the Buddha-dharma. The wisdom endowed at birth is not the unique wisdom found in Buddhism; rather, it is the first step in practicing the Buddha-dharma.

### *Wisdom of Engaged Effort*

There is a big difference between the wisdom of engaged effort and the wisdom endowed at birth. The wisdom of engaged effort involves a high level of understanding, discernment, investigation, and so on, and yet it is also based on strong faith and requires a period of wholehearted, solid practice. Subsequently, when the mind attains a level of purification, the wisdom of engaged effort arises. This type of wisdom arises purely because of the stimulation from the practice of the Buddha-dharma. The wisdom of engaged effort is not attainable from ordinary worldly understanding. In the Buddhist teachings, this wisdom is further split into three stages: these are the three wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice.

### *The Three Wisdoms: Learning, Contemplation, Practice*

To develop the wisdom of learning, we draw upon wisdom endowed at birth, associating with spiritual guides and learning the teachings time and again. Gradually, we develop the ability to understand the Buddha-dharma deeply. When the mind attains a level of

purified faith, a state similar to awakening is initiated.<sup>37</sup> In such a state, we attain an even greater understanding of, and confidence in, the Buddha-dharma. This type of wisdom is attained from learning the Buddha-dharma; therefore, it is more appropriate to call it the wisdom resulting from learning. Beware! Do not be mistaken and think that by merely listening to some *sūtras* and having a little knowledge, the accomplishment of the wisdom of learning is attained. We should know that the wisdom of learning is a special type of wisdom that arises from a pure mind.<sup>38</sup> The ability of this special wisdom to understand and discern the Buddha-dharma is far superior to the ability of ordinary knowledge.<sup>39</sup>

The wisdom of contemplation depends on the wisdom of learning as its foundation. The wisdom of contemplation can further contemplate, investigate, distinguish, and discern dharmas, such that our understanding of the nature of all dharmas and their various aspects, such as causes, conditions, and effects, becomes greater and deeper. This type of understanding, which arises from contemplation, is called the wisdom resulting from contemplation.

The wisdom of practice is founded on both the wisdom of learning and the wisdom of contemplation. With an understanding of all dharmas, which results from achieving the two former wisdoms, and with the mind in the meditative state of tranquility, this wisdom can further investigate and discern the true nature of all dharmas and the myriad aspects of dependent origination. This is a profound wisdom that arises when the mental practices of tranquility and insight can function simultaneously and harmoniously. Therefore, this is called the wisdom resulting from practice.<sup>40</sup>

Of the three wisdoms, the wisdom of learning is the initial stage, and its development relies on contemplation and understanding through the medium of language (names, terms, clauses, and sentences). Then, the wisdom of contemplation gradually moves toward the true meaning through further investigation and reflection upon the understanding gained from the wisdom of learning. Last, the wisdom of practice has a special definition; that is, it must be based on meditative tranquility to investigate the meaning of the dharma without relying on language. These three wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice are collectively called

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<sup>37</sup> In Buddhism faith has many levels. As a practitioner's wisdom develops their experience affirms their faith and this is the process of purification of faith. So faith in Buddhism is not a blind faith. For the sages who have attained awakening, their faith in the Buddha-dharma is called perfect confidence. This is because they have confirmed the Buddha's teachings with their own practice and realization. In our translation, the word faith is used to mean the different levels of faith held by practitioners who have yet to attain perfect confidence.

<sup>38</sup> Note that "pure mind" here does not refer to absolutely pure as with the sages, or imbued with tranquility (*samatha*). Rather, it is referring to a relatively pure mind that is calm but is not yet at the stage of tranquility.

<sup>39</sup> In Buddhism the phenomenon of a person is split into the basics of the five aggregates (form, sensation, perception, mental activities, consciousness). These aggregates in turn are further split into many aspects. Wisdom and its functions are attributed to the aggregate of mental activities. The human as a whole merely manifests the functions that different mental activities perform. For example when a person discerns and investigates something, it is really the wisdom that is doing the investigation. Hence in this article it is the wisdom that possesses certain qualities and not the person.

<sup>40</sup> The wisdom of practice actually contains two elements. One is the progressive element, and the other is the accomplishment or perfection element. This is explained in further detail in Venerable Yinshun's work *The Way to Buddhahood* (pages 367–368 of the Chinese version).

the wisdom of engaged effort because these stages have not yet attained the first level of true realization.<sup>41</sup>

### *True Wisdom*

After accomplishing the wisdom of practice, where tranquility and insight function simultaneously, we can then discern and investigate the dharma even more deeply and thoroughly. Eventually, true wisdom—also called the wisdom of true realization—will arise. With true wisdom, we can end our defilements and awaken to the truth. This is the true goal of developing wisdom. Nevertheless, from the perspective of practicing as a whole, it is inevitable that we initially rely on wisdom endowed at birth. Then, through the path of learning, contemplation, and practice—the stages in the wisdom of engaged effort—we are eventually able to attain this goal.

### *The Relationship between Wisdom Endowed at Birth, Wisdom of Engaged Effort, and True Wisdom*

The path of developing wisdom is the same, whether practicing the *Mahāyāna* or the *Śrāvakayāna*. If we apply the Tiantai school's classification of the six identities concerning Buddha, wisdom endowed at birth is still at the stage of "identified as Buddha due to principle". The learning, contemplation, and practice stages in the wisdom of engaged effort correspond to "identified as Buddha through language", "identified as Buddha through contemplation", and "identified as Buddha due to resemblance" respectively. Only true wisdom corresponds to the stages of "identified as Buddha due to partial realization" and "identified as Buddha due to ultimate realization".<sup>42</sup> Even though the realization of the profound truth is the function of true wisdom, it is impossible to attain realization of the profound truth without wisdom endowed at birth. Even more so, the wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice must not be absent. In other words, without the wisdom of learning, contemplation, and practice as a foundation, it is impossible for true wisdom to arise. Consequently, there is no possibility of ending defilement and realizing the truth. The goal of practicing the Buddha's teachings is to use true

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<sup>41</sup> The term "wisdom of engaged effort" is an attempt to reflect the meaning of the practices in the three wisdoms. These are, as yet, phases on the path of practice, and thus conscious effort to engage in practice is required.

<sup>42</sup> The Tiantai school used the Buddha as a basis for the classification of stages and called this classification system "the six identities concerning Buddha." The first stage is "identified as Buddha due to principle" and refers to the principle that all sentient beings possess Buddha's nature, and therefore, in this respect, they are no different from buddhas. The second stage is "identified as Buddha through language," which refers to those who learn from wise teachers or from the *sūtras*, and through the medium of language they understand that all phenomena are the dharma. Third is "identified as Buddha through contemplation." After knowing that all phenomena are dharmas, one continues practicing according to the teachings in order to gain clear insight, where principles and wisdom align. At this point, the actions and speech of these practitioners are consistent, without contradiction. Fourth is "identified as Buddha due to resemblance." At this stage, after attaining stage three, with further practice one's wisdom becomes clearer and concentration becomes stronger such that the six senses are purified, and delusions arising from erroneous views and thinking ceases, while ignorance is tamed. At this point, one has yet to attain true realization, but the attainment is very similar. Fifth is "identified as Buddha due to partial realization." This stage refers to the gradual ending of ignorance and the attainment of the middle way. Ignorance is grouped into forty-one grades, from the ten levels of abiding, practice, dedication, stages, and the stage of wonderful awakening. As each level is attained, the gradual ending of ignorance and attainment of the middle way is reflected. Sixth is "identified as Buddha due to ultimate realization." This refers to the attainment of Buddhahood after overcoming all the various types of ignorance.

wisdom to end defilement and achieve realization. To first gain true wisdom, we must rely on wisdom endowed at birth and go through the stages of the three wisdoms. This process of developing wisdom is a definitive teaching, not merely a process commonly found in the *sūtras* from ancient India. The teachings by ancient Chinese sages, such as Venerable Zhiyi of the Tiantai school, and others, do not contradict this process.

Therefore, beginners who are learning the Buddha's teachings should take note of the following:

- First, do not mistake listening, reading, researching, and teaching the *sūtras* for the accomplishment of wisdom and consequently be easily contented or proud.
- Second, we must recognize that, even when we progress further and develop the wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice, these are merely the prerequisite practices for learning the Buddha's teachings. We still have a long way to go before we reach the goal. Be careful! Do not develop the arrogance of thinking we have gained perfect awakening or are equal to the buddhas.
- Third, to attain true wisdom, we must not neglect the wisdom endowed at birth and the wisdom of engaged effort. In other words, we must not slight the value of repeated practice of the wisdoms, such as learning and contemplation.

### ***B. The Wisdom of Engaged Effort toward Nondiscrimination, Fundamental Wisdom of Nondiscrimination, and Derivative Wisdom of Nondiscrimination***

Another system for categorizing wisdom is based on the nondiscriminative wisdom that realizes the nature of truth, which comprises the wisdom of engaged effort toward nondiscrimination, the fundamental wisdom of nondiscrimination, and the derivative wisdom of nondiscrimination.<sup>43</sup> The wisdom of engaged effort toward nondiscrimination, which is the wisdom of engaged effort, refers to the wisdom that is still developing toward the realization of the truth. Next, the wisdom that realizes the truth and accords with the truth is called the fundamental wisdom of nondiscrimination. Last, arising from this fundamental wisdom of nondiscrimination is the derivative wisdom of nondiscrimination, which can thoroughly investigate and understand all dharmas.

### ***C. Worldly Wisdom, Transcendental Wisdom, Perfect Transcendental Wisdom***

Wisdom can also be categorized based on the progression from an ordinary being to a buddha, during which there are worldly wisdom, transcendental wisdom, and perfect transcendental wisdom. Worldly wisdom refers to the wisdom that can discern and investigate;

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<sup>43</sup> Here, this categorization is primarily used in the teachings of the Consciousness-only school. These three wisdoms all include the descriptor "nondiscrimination"; however, the first stage we have translated as the wisdom of engaged effort toward nondiscrimination because, at this stage, the realization of nondiscrimination is yet to be accomplished, whereas the fundamental wisdom of nondiscrimination and the derivative wisdom of nondiscrimination are at the stages where awakening has been achieved.

worldly wisdom is possessed by ordinary beings and Buddhist practitioners who have yet to attain any awakened stage of the sages. Transcendental wisdom leads to transcendence from this world and can fully understand suffering, emptiness, impermanence, and selflessness, which are the characteristics of all dharmas.<sup>44</sup> Transcendental wisdom is the wisdom possessed by the sages of the two vehicles. Perfect transcendental wisdom is the unique wisdom of the *Mahāyāna*, which only the buddhas and bodhisattvas possess. Although this wisdom is transcendental, it penetrates the two truths without obstruction.<sup>45</sup> This means it can fully comprehend true nature and manifested appearances simultaneously. Due to its superiority over the wisdom of the two vehicles, which is inclined toward the realization of the ultimate truth only, it is called perfect transcendental wisdom.

This way of categorizing wisdom produces meanings very similar to those of three wisdoms categorized by Nāgārjuna in *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*. In this teaching, Nāgārjuna talks about the heretical wisdom that leads to rebirth in higher realms, two-vehicle wisdom that is biased toward the truth, and the wisdom of the bodhisattvas.

#### ***D. Omniscience, Wisdom Regarding the Path, Buddha’s Wisdom***

In the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, wisdom is also grouped into “omniscience, wisdom of the aspects of the paths, and buddha’s wisdom.” This order reflects the difference in the wisdom of the three-vehicle sages: the *śrāvakas*, the bodhisattvas, and the buddhas.

The sages of the two vehicles, in essence, possess thorough realization of true nature—wisdom with which one knows the universal characteristic of all phenomena. They also possess the various aspects of all dharmas—wisdom with which one knows the myriad manifestations of phenomena. However, because these practitioners loathe worldly existence, they place greater emphasis on the wisdom with which one knows the universal characteristic of all phenomena, the true universal nature of all dharmas. Thus, their wisdom is referred to as omniscience.<sup>46</sup>

The *Mahāyāna* bodhisattvas also possess two types of wisdom: the wisdom of the paths and the wisdom of the aspects of the paths. Their emphasis is on applying the wisdom, with which they awaken to the truth, into this worldly [life to benefit sentient beings]. This means

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<sup>44</sup> Transcendental wisdom can have two aspects. One aspect is its quality; that is, although this wisdom is not common to this world, it does exist in this world but is only possessed by the enlightened sages. The other aspect is its function; that is, this wisdom allows one to gain liberation from this world because it allows one to fully comprehend the truth of emptiness and so on.

<sup>45</sup> “Two truths” refers to the conventional truth relating to this world and the ultimate truth relating to the true nature of all dharmas.

<sup>46</sup> The two-vehicle path’s omniscience is unlike a buddha’s omniscience. Two-vehicle sages only know everything in terms of the true nature of all phenomena. The buddha’s omniscience knows everything about all phenomena: their true nature, their manifested forms, and so on. In Nāgārjuna’s teaching *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, he clarifies that the two-vehicle path’s omniscience is only in name: as with a drawing of a lamp, there is the picture of a lamp but not the function of the lamp (Taisho volume 25, page 259, column a, lines 25-27). 《大智度論》卷 27：「佛一切智、一切種智，皆是真實。聲聞、辟支佛但有名字一切智；譬如畫燈，但有燈名，無有燈用。如聲聞、辟支佛，」（大正 25，259a25-27）

that although they investigate emptiness, selflessness, et cetera so as to accord with true universal nature, they also undertake various practices and learn many paths to become proficient in the various aspects of all dharmas.<sup>47</sup> Bodhisattvas have deep compassion, which makes them determined to help all sentient beings. Therefore, they delight in learning many different practices, which is reflected in their vow, “Dharma practices are countless; I vow to learn them all.” A true practitioner of the bodhisattva path must focus on the wisdom of insight that encompasses all paths; thus, their wisdom is called the wisdom of the aspects of the paths.

The buddhas with supreme awakening can also be said to possess two wisdoms; these are omniscience and wisdom of all aspects of everything (buddha’s wisdom). Using countless practices of insight, buddhas perfectly penetrate the true nature of all dharmas and the countless appearances arising from cause and effect. Thus, they can penetrate both the conventional truth and the ultimate truth simultaneously without obstructions and exertion of effort. This wisdom is the most perfect, and it is therefore called buddha’s wisdom.

From these three ways of categorization found in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, we can see the difference in the characteristics of the three-vehicle’s wisdom.

## Wisdom Categorized into Pairs

In the scriptures, we also find many categorizations of wisdom into pairs.

### A. *The Wisdom of the Stability of Dharmas and Wisdom of Nirvana*

First, looking at the *sūtras* of the *Śrāvakayāna*, there is the wisdom of the stability of dharmas and the wisdom of nirvana.<sup>48</sup> The *sūtras* say one must “first attain the wisdom of the stability of dharmas, and then the wisdom of nirvana is attainable.” The wisdom of the stability of dharmas is the skillful wisdom that can clearly understand how phenomena are established under the laws of cause and effect and dependent co-arising. What this means is that to penetrate the truth of all dharmas—suffering, emptiness, impermanence, and selflessness—and attain the transcendental state of nirvana, we must rely on the proper understanding of the various aspects of dharmas that are dependently originated and closely associated with sentient beings.

The ancient masters say, “Without relying on conventional truths, the ultimate truth is

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<sup>47</sup> In this teaching, “various aspects of all dharmas” generally refers to the five aggregates, twelve cognitive bases, eighteen perceptual elements, cause and effect concerning the cycle of birth and death, and so on. This is discussed later in section 9: Object of Contemplation for Insight Meditation. However, here, in the discussion of bodhisattva practices, “various aspects of all dharmas” places more emphasis on worldly life situations, such as understanding sentient beings’ needs and the required skills and knowledge to fulfill the task of benefiting sentient beings.

<sup>48</sup> The wisdom of the stability of dharmas is referring to stability in the sense of certainty or inevitability. This means that all dharmas or phenomena are subject to the law of cause and effect. Their intrinsic nature is certain to follow the laws of cause and effect. This certainty is the so-named “stability of dharmas.” The wisdom of nirvana is not just to know about nirvana and its characteristics and so on. Rather, this wisdom includes a personal ability to experience and realize nirvana.

unattainable.” This reflects the same meaning because the ultimate truth is universal, without disparity, without differences, indeterminable, inconceivable, and indescribable. Only by relying on the wisdom with which one can understand conventional truths, and through gradual practice, is one able to penetrate the ultimate truth. What this means in terms of practicing the Buddha-dharma in this world is that we should not ignore the importance of understanding the various aspects of dharmas, such as cause and effect, dependent co-arising, and so on. If our practice focuses only on [cultivating] the wisdom of ultimate truth, we will easily fall into the incorrect path where we attach to the doctrines and slight wholesome deeds,<sup>49</sup> or we will fall into a state where we become attached to emptiness as an existing entity.<sup>50</sup>

### ***B. Wisdom of Phenomena (Upāya) and Wisdom of Truth (Prajñā)***

In the *Mahāyāna sūtras*, a common pair is the wisdom of phenomena and wisdom of truth. These two types of wisdom have many synonyms. The more commonly known terms are *prajñā* (wisdom) and *upāya* (skillful means), which are transcriptions found in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*. These two terms are translated as “wisdom” and “skillful means” in the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*. When *prajñā* and *upāya*—or wisdom and skillful means—become mutually supportive and progress each other, they can reveal the wondrous function of liberation from fetters. Therefore, the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* states, “Wisdom without skillful means is fettered; skillful means without wisdom is fettered. Wisdom with skillful means is liberation, and skillful means with wisdom is liberation.” These two wisdoms are also called wisdom of the paths and wisdom of the aspects of the paths. The Consciousness-only school generally refers to them as fundamental wisdom and derivative wisdom. Other synonyms include wisdom and knowledge, true wisdom and skillful wisdom, wisdom of realizing the truth and wisdom of knowing all phenomena. These ways of categorization are very important in the *Mahāyāna* bodhisattva practice.

The ultimate true nature of all dharmas is naturally without disparity, without any differentiation, indeterminable, and inconceivable. However, in terms of our path of cultivation toward awakening, the objects to be investigated and understood can be grouped into two categories. One category is the real, ultimate nature, and the other is the diversity of conventional phenomena. The real, ultimate nature is the universal emptiness within all phenomena, which is also called the nature of nonarising or cessation or the nature of cessation.

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<sup>49</sup> Practitioners that fall into this situation are not lazy per se; rather, they may be very diligent at the practice they adhere to. However, because they are fixated on the truth and on the doctrines on emptiness and completely mesmerized by the contemplation of the truth and its realization, they ignore the importance of phenomena in this world and place little importance on the practices that bring benefit to the beings in the world. These wholesome worldly deeds are also the causal seeds that ensure bodhisattvas ultimately realize the fruit of Buddhahood. The impetus for undertaking these wholesome deeds comes from a deep understanding of the law of cause and effect, dependent origination, and so on.

<sup>50</sup> In this second situation, the attachment to emptiness as real and existent is essentially the same as attaching to the self. While worldly beings attach to an “I” as being real, these practitioners know the “I” does not exist, but their unbalanced focus on the truth leads them to attach to the notion of emptiness as being an actual existent object.

The diversity of conventional phenomena is the innumerable different phenomena: all the different manifestations of causes and effects flowing from dependent co-arising, or the multitude of differences among sentient beings and their worlds. Accordingly, it is said that the wisdom of bodhisattvas possesses both *prajñā* (wisdom) and *upāya* (skillful means). Regarding these two types of wisdom possessed by bodhisattvas, in terms of the ultimate truth and conventional phenomena, as explained above, *prajñā* is to realize true nature and *upāya* is to fully understand the manifestations of all phenomena. In terms of our own liberation and the liberation of others, *prajñā* reflects the self-realization of emptiness [that leads to liberation], whereas *upāya* reflects the skillful means to guide others to liberation. These are the two marvelous functions of the *Mahāyāna* wisdom.

Nevertheless, in the state of the ultimate truth, there is only the truth that is nondual, also called the truth without diversity. There is essentially no separation between ultimate and conventional or between truth and phenomena. Therefore, there is only the wisdom of *prajñā*. The wisdom of skillful means or derivative wisdom is merely the marvelous use of *prajñā* after it has been attained. This is why Kumārajīva uses gold as a simile to explain how these two wisdoms differ but are the same [in essence]: *prajñā* is like pure gold, and skillful means are like the artifacts made from the pure gold. When cultivating the Buddha-dharma, once realization is attained, the fundamental wisdom (*prajñā*) is attained and one awakens to emptiness. Afterward, there arises the derivative wisdom (*upāya*), which deeply understands dependent co-arising and enables one to make the buddha lands sublime and bring sentient beings to enlightenment. Thereafter, fundamental wisdom and derivative wisdom gradually merge, mutually supporting each other's progress until they become perfect and function simultaneously. This is the perfect and ultimate wisdom of the middle path in Buddhism.

## Other Types of Groupings

Apart from the three and two types of wisdom [groupings] discussed above, the *sūtras* and exegeses have other groupings of wisdom. There are the “eight receptivities and eight knowledges” of the training stages of the *Śrāvakayāna* sages,<sup>51</sup> and the wisdom of exhausting defilements and the wisdom of the nonarising of defilements of the arhats. Moreover, regarding the wisdom at the stage of Buddhahood in the *Mahāyāna*, the Consciousness-only school arranges wisdom into the Buddha's wisdom of accomplishing deeds, Buddha's wisdom of

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<sup>51</sup> These eight receptivities and knowledges are pairs of wisdom that reflect the progressive development of wisdom of the *Śrāvakayāna* sages while they are in their training phase. These eight pairs encompass the training stage from the first fruit up to, but not including, the final attainment of Arhatship. The “eight receptivities” refers to one's cognitive ability to fully accept a doctrine even before one has acquired or realized the knowledge pertaining to that doctrine. According to the *abhidharma*, receptivity is the moment that occurs immediately before realizing the knowledge. (For more information, see *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma*, Sanskrit-English Glossary, s.v. *kṣānti*, by Bhikkhu K. L. Dhammajoti.)

pristine insight, Buddha’s wisdom of equality, and Buddha’s wisdom of great perfection.<sup>52</sup> Esoteric Buddhism adds [to the Consciousness-only school’s four groupings] the wisdom of the fundamental nature of the universe to form the five wisdoms of Buddhahood (where the wisdom of pristine insight and wisdom of equality are attainable by the bodhisattvas). Then, the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra on the Benevolent King’s Rule of the Country* says that from the bodhisattva stages to the attainment of Buddhahood, there are five receptivities.

## Summary

In the Buddha-dharma, there are various categories of wisdom based on different meanings and stages. Although these categories are many, even countless, essentially what the practitioner realizes is the ultimate nature of phenomena and, conversely, that there is only one true wisdom with which we awaken to the truth. With this true wisdom, we can accord with the truth until we attain the highest stage of accomplishment, which is perfect and unobstructed.

## 9. The Object of Contemplation for Insight Meditation

From the explanations provided up to this point, we now know that the function of wisdom is the ability to distinguish, discern, and analyze. So, what exactly is the object to be distinguished, discerned, and analyzed—that is, the object of contemplation? In the *Agama Sūtra*, the Buddha once said, “If one is unable to fully understand and directly realize a single dharma, one will not attain liberation.”<sup>53</sup> The goal of practicing the Buddha-dharma is to attain liberation, this goal is universal to all practitioners of the three vehicles. To reach this goal, we have to rely on profound wisdom to thoroughly penetrate all dharmas. In other words, the object of contemplation in the cultivation of wisdom is all dharmas. During the process of the cultivation of wisdom, we must thoroughly penetrate the nature of emptiness and nonself in all dharmas. Penetrate the nature of emptiness is transcendental wisdom, the most important virtue in Buddhism, and its qualities are the ability to investigate all dharmas and realize the universal nature of all dharmas.

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

Within the cultivation of wisdom, and based on the spiritual capacity of the practitioners, there are two categories of wisdom. One is *Śrāvakayāna* wisdom. This wisdom is also attained by *Mahāyāna* practitioners, and hence it is also called the wisdom of the three

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<sup>52</sup> These four types of wisdom belonging to the buddhas are paired with the purification of the eight consciousnesses in the Consciousness-only school. Upon the attainment of Buddhahood, the first five consciousnesses of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body become the Buddha’s wisdom of accomplishing deeds; the sixth consciousness of the mind transforms into the Buddha’s wisdom of pristine insight; the seventh consciousness becomes the Buddha’s wisdom of equality; and the eighth consciousness develops into the wisdom of great perfection.

<sup>53</sup> Here, “fully understand and directly realize a single dharma” means that one understands any dharma in terms of its true nature.

vehicles. The other is *Mahāyāna* wisdom. This wisdom is only attained by the bodhisattvas and is not found in the *Śrāvākayāna*; therefore, it is also called the unique wisdom of the *Mahāyāna*.

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

### ***Essence of the Wisdom of the Three Vehicles***

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

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

This wisdom of insight that uses the four noble truths as its object can be further split into two aspects. One aspect is to attain the wisdom of the stability of dharmas—that is, to understand clearly the various aspects of dharmas revealed in the four noble truths.<sup>54</sup> The other aspect is to attain the wisdom of nirvana, which is to awaken to the true nature of dharmas as revealed by the four noble truths. Therefore, the wisdom of the three vehicles must include the elements of proper investigation into various aspects of dharmas and the truth. In other words, the wisdom of the three vehicles must incorporate the attainment of the wisdom of the stability

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<sup>54</sup> This wisdom focuses on understanding how dharmas come to be.

of dharmas and the wisdom of nirvana.

In the Buddha's teachings, apart from the four noble truths, he also taught about dependent co-arising. If we look at dependent co-arising in terms of the cycle of existence and the cessation of life and death, there are twelve folds.<sup>55</sup> The teaching on twelvefold dependent co-arising begins "with ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be]; . . . with birth as condition, aging and death."<sup>56</sup> This is the cycle of existence, which is captured in the noble truths of suffering and origin of suffering. Conversely, with the cessation of ignorance up to the cessation of aging and death, this is the cessation of the cycle of existence,<sup>57</sup> which is captured in the noble truths of cessation of suffering and path leading to the cessation of suffering.

Although the four noble truths and the twelvefold dependent co-arising are presented as different teachings, their underlying meanings are not all that dissimilar. For *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners, the path is to make the vow to depart from this defiled world for the sake of ending the cycle of life and death and attaining nirvana. Accordingly, they rely on the teachings of the four noble truths or the twelvefold dependent co-arising as the method of practice. Therefore, in the *Śrāvakayāna* texts, there is more emphasis on these teachings. For example, in the *Exegesis on Establishment of True Meaning*, the chapters are arranged in a sequence according to the four noble truths. Additionally, in the *Treatise on the Way to Liberation*, which originates from a branch of the Theravada school, the section on the study of wisdom begins by teaching practitioners to first understand the five aggregates, twelve cognitive bases, eighteen perceptual elements,<sup>58</sup> and cause and effect concerning the cycle of birth and death. These are teachings related to the various aspects of dharmas in the world, with which a practitioner begins on the path. It then discusses the awakening to the nature of stillness that underlies impermanence and no self.

### *Examine the Cause and Effect Relationship in All Dharmas*

The wisdom of insight belonging to *śrāvaka* practitioners may be narrow in terms of

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<sup>55</sup> The twelve folds of dependent co-arising are ignorance, volitional formation, consciousness, mind and body, six sense faculties, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, existence, birth, aging, and death. (For purposes of clarity, for the fold of name and form, which refers to the mind and body of sentient beings, we have used the phrase "mind and body.")

<sup>56</sup> See Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Canada: Wisdom Publications, 2000), page 533.

<sup>57</sup> The causal relationship that brings about the cessation of the cycle of life and death is captured in the following description: "With the cessation of what does the cessation of aging-and-death come about? . . . 'When there is no birth, aging-and-death does not come to be; with the cessation of birth comes cessation of aging-and-death.'" This process applies likewise to the other folds where the cessation of the previous fold will bring about the cessation of the subsequent fold. For more details, see Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Canada: Wisdom Publications, 2000), page 602.

<sup>58</sup> The five aggregates are form, sensation, perception, volitional formation, and consciousness. The twelve cognitive bases are the six sense faculties (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind) and their respective six sense objects (forms, sounds, aromas, tastes, textures, and objects of the mind). The eighteen perceptual elements are the twelve cognitive bases plus the six consciousnesses corresponding to each sense faculty—that is, eye consciousness, ear consciousness, and so on.

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

Therefore, with *abhidharma* texts, it is always the case that they begin with teachings on the aggregates, cognitive bases, and perceptual elements, or with form, consciousness, mental qualities arising with consciousness, conditioned dharmas independent of consciousness, and unconditioned dharmas.<sup>59</sup> All of these are used to explicitly explain individual dharmas in terms of their common traits and their individual characteristics, their essence, function, cause, conditions, effects, and karmic results. These *abhidharma* texts also explain under what conditions a dharma is associated with or not associated with another dharma, and under what conditions a dharma is attained or not attained by another dharma. The *Lotus Sūtra* refers to the same concepts when it says, “truth has aspects of nature, truth has aspects of appearance . . . truth has aspects of karmic results, truth has aspects of consistency from beginning to end, et cetera.” Even though [in the *Lotus Sūtra*] it says that only the buddhas, among themselves, can fully comprehend these aspects, this does not mean that the *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners do not comprehend anything at all. It is merely that their understanding is not as exhaustive [as the buddhas’].

Regarding the teachings on the various aspects of dharmas, the most detailed explanations can be found in the *abhidharma* texts. In the ancient times, the *tripiṭaka* teachings of *sūtras*, *vinayas*, and *abhidharmas* were paired with the three progressive trainings of morality, meditation, and wisdom. The *abhidharma* texts are considered to focus in particular on the training of wisdom. According to the various texts of the *abhidharma*, the teachings on the training of wisdom generally begin with learning about cause and effect, knowing what is good and evil, understanding that there are past and future lives, learning that there are ordinary

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<sup>59</sup> “Aggregates” refers to the five aggregates, “cognitive bases” refers to the twelve cognitive bases, and “elements” refers to the eighteen perceptual elements. All these groups of dharmas are used to explain the composition of sentient beings in terms of the interactions between the physical body, the mental state, and external phenomena.

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

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

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

beings caught in cyclic existence and that there are sages who have [transcended cyclic existence and] gone beyond the three realms, and so on. Only when practitioners understand and are truly confident in these teachings are they considered to be equipped with right view (wisdom of conventional truth). This is also the foundation for, and initial stage in, the cultivation of wisdom.

*Accordance with the Three Dharma Seals*

Of course, attaining the wisdom of conventional truth is not enough to end the cycle of life and death. If we want liberation from cyclic existence, we must progress in our cultivation of wisdom and understand that the cyclic existence is due to defilements, and the root of defilements is ignorance. Ignorance [in terms of the aspect of knowing correctly] is that one cannot understand the true nature of all dharmas as they really are. As a result of being unable to understand the truth as it really is, one creates many attachments; this results in erroneous conduct, which is not in accord with the transcendental right view.<sup>60</sup> This delusional attachment that arises from ignorance mainly stems from attachment to permanence, even though things are impermanent; attaching to things as endowed with a self, even though there is no self; attaching to things as pure, even though they are not; and attaching to experiences as pleasurable, even though they are not.<sup>61</sup> Because of these delusional attachments, sentient beings develop behaviors that are not in accord with the transcendental right view and create endless unwholesome karma, which results in the suffering associated with the cycle of life and death.

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

Regarding this [teaching on realizing the three dharma seals], the northern *Sarvāstivāda*

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<sup>60</sup> “Transcendental right view” refers to having the right view toward impermanence, suffering, emptiness, nonself, and so on. Sages are equipped with this transcendental right view and therefore do not develop attachments and defilements, which lead to erroneous conduct.

<sup>61</sup> The error in viewing things as pure and in believing that certain objects and experiences are pleasurable refers to the erroneous perception held by sentient beings. Because of this error, sentient beings easily develop attachment to these objects and experiences.

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

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

*Conditioned dharmas are impermanent,  
their nature is to arise and cease.  
After arising they cease,  
their pacification is true bliss.*

What this means is that after investigating all dharmas to see their true nature of impermanence, we progress to realizing things as they truly are, with no arising and completely pacified.<sup>62</sup> The Chan school of Chinese *Mahāyāna* [interprets and] changes the last line of the above verse—“their pacification is true bliss”—to “pacification is realized.” In the process of cultivation, they also first observe momentary rising and passing of mental objects and then progress to awakening to things as they truly are, neither arising nor ceasing. This method of the Chan school and the core principle of the three-vehicle's wisdom are very similar.

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<sup>62</sup> Note here that the definition of “all dharmas” differs between the various vehicles. When the *Śrāvākayāna* talks about investigating all dharmas, this is referring to all the objects that give rise to consciousness, namely the six sense faculties (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind) and their corresponding sense objects (forms, sounds, aromas, tastes, textures, and mental objects) and the sense consciousnesses (eye consciousness, ear consciousness, and so on). Through these sense faculties, objects, and consciousnesses, sentient beings are able to experience and interact with the world around them. So, in terms of all dharmas, this is generally the scope that the *Śrāvākayāna* practice focuses on. When the *Mahāyāna* discusses all dharmas, the scope is much broader. It not only includes the sense faculties and so on but also things that the ordinary person cannot experience daily, such as the sublime buddha lands, the transcendental states of the great bodhisattvas, and the virtues of the *Mahāyāna* sages.

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

### *Object of Contemplation of the Mahāyāna*

Whereas the object of contemplation in the wisdom of the three vehicles is the dharmas that are closest to us, the object of contemplation for the unique wisdom of the *Mahāyāna* extends to include everything in the endless universe. Although the objects to be investigated encompass everything, the first stage focuses on one's own body and mind. With the *Mahāyāna* scriptures, it is commonly the case that one begins with investigating one's body and mind and then extends the investigation to include countless sentient beings, endless realms of existence, and all mental states and physical objects apart from oneself. In this method, the objects of contemplation are obviously much broader than in the *Śrāvakayāna* method. As in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, all types of dharmas are employed to explain emptiness. When bodhisattvas awaken to the nature of the truth, this awakening is more thorough than that of the *Śrāvakas*. In other words, the object of contemplation in the *Śrāvakayāna* method, which is the four noble truths, has limits, whereas the *Mahāyāna*'s object, which covers the boundless universe, has no limits. This is why *Mahāyāna* practitioners can attain the ultimate goal of Buddhahood and become omniscient, whereas the *Śrāvakayāna* practitioner's attainment is only the realization of the truth.<sup>63</sup>

### *Differences in Vows Lead to Differences in the Object of Contemplation*

The Consciousness-only school says that intentions of *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners are strongly focused on leaving this world and are eager to gain liberation for themselves. Therefore, *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners contemplate on their own body and mind for the sake of realizing the truth of suffering, emptiness, and impermanence, which can end cyclic existence. On the contrary, the bodhisattvas of the *Mahāyāna* have great compassion, and in everything they do, their intention is to liberate sentient beings. Therefore, their wisdom of insight cannot be limited to only their own selves. Instead, it must revolve around all dharmas, and use all dharmas as the object of contemplation.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Here, the difference between omniscience and the realization of the truth lies in the breadth of wisdom. In the *Śrāvaka* practice, the realization of the truth relies on the four noble truths and is sufficient to bring one to liberation through the realization of emptiness, impermanence, and so on. Omniscience, however, includes not only the realization of the truth in order to gain liberation for oneself but also includes the skillful means of guiding sentient beings to liberation, all aspects of the universe, mind and phenomena, and so on. A common simile used to highlight the difference between the *Śrāvakayāna* awakening and the *Mahāyāna* awakening is the comparison between the space in a single pore and the space in the universe. In each, the essence of space is the same, but the quantum is vastly different.

<sup>64</sup> This paragraph provides the reason why bodhisattvas contemplate everything, as opposed to the *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners. The impetus is in their vows of compassion to liberate all beings, thus they must develop the wisdom that will enable that compassionate vow to be fulfilled.

### ***Wisdom Practice of Mahāyāna Based on Worldly Phenomena and Transcendental Truth***

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

In terms of investigating various aspects of dharmas, a practitioner's investigation begins with the fundamental concepts of cause and effect, wholesome and unwholesome, worldly beings and sages, past and future lives, and so on. Then they extend even further to include the body and minds of *Mahāyāna* sages and the countless sublime buddha lands. All these aspects of dharmas are the objects of contemplation that the *Mahāyāna* wisdom of insight should penetrate. [Among these aspects, some are the various situations on the *Mahāyāna* path, and some are the resultant virtues of the buddhas], all of which are very important teachings in the *Mahāyāna*. In terms of the situations on the path, these include the way in which practitioners initiate their bodhi mind at the start, then diligently engage in practice, gradually progress, and traverse eons of time before they perfect their practice and attain Buddhahood. This process highlights the bodhisattva's causal deeds. In terms of the resultant virtues attained by buddhas, these include countless unfathomable merits, such as the ability to appear in myriad manifestations, expound many types of teachings, reveal the ultimate aspects of a buddha's body, and how sublime and marvelous the buddha lands are. The main subject matter of *Mahāyāna* texts revolves around the superior causal practices of bodhisattvas and the resultant perfect virtues of buddhas. These causal practices and resultant virtues are also the profound objects of contemplation in the *Mahāyāna* wisdom of insight. For those just starting to cultivate the bodhisattva practices, these [lofty] aspects are something to which they can only aspire. This means that, for the time being, these aspects are ideal goals, which motivate beginners to do all they can to practice [diligently] and attain these virtues. When true wisdom arises, this is the realization of the ultimate truth, and then, finally, there is the attainment of Buddhahood.

### ***Realization of the Ultimate Truth***

The realization of the ultimate truth centers on emptiness, which pervades all dharmas. The realization of the truth through the *Mahāyāna* wisdom has two key points of difference from the realization of the truth through *Śrāvakayāna* wisdom. First, the *Śrāvakayāna* teaching on attainment of awakening points to a progressive path using the three dharma seals; that is, by gradually awakening to impermanence, one achieves selflessness and finally nirvana. Conversely, the *Mahāyāna* teaching on the wisdom of insight reveals a direct path of awakening to cessation and emptiness of all dharmas. At the same time, this ultimate truth is the basis upon which the *Mahāyāna* teaching explains all dharmas and all their aspects [which are the objects of contemplation in the *Mahāyāna* wisdom of insight]. When the scriptures say

that suffering and so on do not exist, such teachings are from the perspective of the ultimate truth. The *Mahāyāna* teaching clearly differs from the *Śrāvakayāna* teaching on the object of contemplation, which is based on impermanence as the entryway. In the *Mahāyāna* texts, based on the contemplation object that is realized, various terms for the truth have been established, for example, nature of all dharmas, truth, selflessness, emptiness, highest reality, neither arising nor ceasing, and *tathāgatagarbha*. In some *Mahāyāna* scriptures, the terms are combined to become “all dharmas are empty of real essence, no arising, no cessation, originally still, naturally in a state of nirvana.” Alternatively, some teachings say all sentient beings are endowed with the [true] nature of dharmas: it is permanent and lasting, and it is true and real. The *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* says that all dharmas are ultimately empty, that there is no real intrinsic nature. This explanation has the same meaning [regarding the ultimate nature of all dharmas].

Second, *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners focus on contemplating their own body and mind and seem to have less consideration for other external objects. Their contemplation merely needs to focus on their own body and mind to realize that there is no “I” and “mine.” This is sufficient for them to attain liberation. This is not the case in the *Mahāyāna*. In the sequence of practices in the *Madhyamaka* established by Nāgārjuna, although the last step to attain liberation relies on the contemplation of no “I” and “mine,” during the preceding stages, bodhisattvas are required to extensively contemplate the empty nature of all dharmas. Another example is the Consciousness-only practitioners; they explain that the fundamental error is sentient beings’ cognition of objects [apart from the mind] as external and real existing things, referred to as delusional phenomena of erroneous attachment. In their teaching, in the contemplation of consciousness only, the ultimate realization of the truth is to awaken to the emptiness of equality—that is, the state of accomplishment of perfection. However, before this realization of ultimate nature of consciousness only, the practitioners always contemplate the dharmas separate from the mind and realize that these dharmas are empty of intrinsic nature and merely projections of the mind. On account of realizing that there are no external and real existing things, Consciousness-only practitioners attain the state where there is no object and where their mind is still.

### ***Progression in the Practice of Worldly Phenomena and Transcendental Truth***

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

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

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

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

In the Chinese Buddhist teachings, there are some teachings that instruct practitioners to directly contemplate the state of perfection and coherence from the start.<sup>65</sup> This differs from the teachings of the Indian sages. The practice taught in the Chinese Buddhist Chan school [which similarly has no gradual stages] is simple and direct, with practical benefits to the body

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<sup>65</sup> This means to have no gradual progression and is possibly referring to the *Huayan* school.

and mind. Compared with the aforementioned Chinese Buddhist teachings, this is better.<sup>66</sup>

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

## 10. Progression in the Cultivation of Wisdom

### Wisdom of Learning

Some people, in their previous lives, made great strides in the cultivation of wisdom; as a result, in this present life, they can attain realization upon hearing the Buddha-dharma for the first time. However, if we connect each life from past to present, to future, in a continuum, all practitioners have to go through several stages, from the initiation of the vow until the point of realization. That is to say, they have to develop the wisdoms of learning, contemplation and practice and then they can attain the realization of true wisdom (also called the realization of [undefined] *samādhi*). It is not possible to skip the path of the three worldly wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice, and still attain realization.

In the *Śrāvakayāna* teachings, from the beginning to the awakened stages, there are the four factors for entry into Sagehood, which are “associating with spiritual guides, broad and repeated learning,<sup>67</sup> reflecting on the dharma properly and thoroughly, practicing the noble eightfold path for the sake of nirvana.” This means that beginners learning the Buddha’s teachings should associate with spiritual guides and rely on the teachings of these guides to gradually cultivate the wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice.

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

It is obvious that the cultivation of the three worldly wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice is the essential path we must follow for practicing the Buddha-dharma. This is the definitive path followed by both the *Mahāyāna* and *Śrāvakayāna*. Even

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<sup>66</sup> Here the text is trying to express that the simplicity and practical benefits from the Chan school’s teachings makes the Chan school relatively better than the other Chinese Buddhist teachings that instruct practitioners to directly contemplate the state of perfection.

<sup>67</sup> This factor (broad and repeated learning) is sometimes presented as learning the righteous dharma (聽聞正法).

though the ultimate goal in the development of wisdom is to awaken to the true nature of all dharmas, from the aspect of the whole process of cultivation, it is unacceptable to ignore the foundations: the wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice. Therefore, when discussing the development of wisdom, it is obvious we must follow the proper process of the path to explain these three worldly wisdoms separately in their sequence. Hence, when discussing the three wisdoms, we should begin with the wisdom of learning.

### ***Aspects and Ways to Practice the Wisdom of Learning***

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

All that we learn from spiritual guides or the scriptures are the teachings from the Buddha, bodhisattvas, and great sages. As for how we should learn and practice the teachings, the scriptures provide a lot of guidance, such as listening attentively and seeking clarifications on doubts, or reading, memorizing, and writing out the teachings. We should adopt these various ways of learning and practicing in order to accomplish the wisdom of learning.

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

The wisdom of learning is the foundational stage in the development of wisdom, so, naturally, we should seek extensive learning and broad knowledge regarding the various characteristics of phenomena denoted by terms and different doctrines and their practices. Nevertheless, what Buddhism emphasizes is how to grasp the essence of the Buddha-dharma and penetrate the profound transcendental meaning while tirelessly undertaking broad learning. Therefore, according to the underlying meaning of the Buddha-dharma, extensive learning and broad knowledge does not equate to the wisdom of learning. Only when broad knowledge and extensive learning accord with the three dharma seals or the true dharma seal can they be regarded as the wisdom of learning. As the *Śrāvakayāna sūtras* teach, the ability to properly and carefully contemplate impermanence, selflessness, and nirvana is broad learning. The

*Mahāyāna sūtras* say that broad learning is the ability to learn about the nature of cessation and the emptiness of all dharmas, or the nature of the truth. If we are unable to accord with the three dharma seals or the true dharma seal when practicing the Buddha-dharma, we have strayed from the essence of the Buddha-dharma, and we will not succeed in accomplishing the wisdom of learning.

### ***The Wisdom of Learning Requires Proper Practice and Personal Experience***

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

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

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

#### ***Meaning of Broad and Repeated Learning***

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

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

## **Wisdom of Contemplation**

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

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

The wisdom of contemplation corresponds to the factor of contemplating the dharma properly and thoroughly in the four factors for entry into Sagehood. Regarding the four reliances, the wisdom of contemplation corresponds to reliance on the ultimate teachings and not the provisional teachings. In order for contemplation and investigation to conform to the truth, we should rely on the ultimate teachings and take these teachings as the yardstick when analyzing the Buddha-dharma. Only then will the resultant investigative wisdom be correct. Otherwise, the conclusions from our contemplation will be biased or erroneous, and will never accord with the Buddha-dharma's true meaning.

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

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

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

mean that there is a self.

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

### ***The Boundary between Ultimate and Provisional Teachings***

Where exactly is the boundary between the ultimate and provisional teachings? Generally [in relation to the ultimate goal], the *Śrāvakayāna* teachings belong to the provisional category, and the *Mahāyāna* teachings belong to the ultimate category. However, in the *Mahāyāna* texts, many of the guidelines that cater to various situations still have elements that are provisional. When the Buddha taught the dharma for the sake of encouraging beings to have faith and practice, he would frequently praise that particular *sūtra*. Almost every *sūtra* contains descriptions to the effect that this teaching is “the king of all *sūtras*.” For the later disciples of the Buddha, it is not sufficient to merely rely on these sentences of praise in a *sūtra* as proof that a particular *sūtra* is ultimate and perfect and to then rely on this *sūtra* as the standard by which to conclude which teachings are ultimate or provisional.

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

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

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

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

## **Wisdom of Practice**

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

Contemplation is also literally translated as “mental actions” [based on Sanskrit], which was originally a synonym for “reflection on.” Prior to attaining concentration, when the mind is yet to accord with the concentrated state, any activities of discernment and investigation are carried out with a mind that has some degree of focus but is not yet at the state of concentration,

and this is called the wisdom of contemplation. When the mind attains concentration and in that state is able to investigate and discern the truth of all dharmas, this is called the wisdom of practice.

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

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

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

Merely focusing on the aspects of conventional phenomena to accomplish concentration is not enough to propel us toward realization. Only with further investigation of selflessness and the ultimate emptiness of all dharmas can the wisdom of practice initiate the pure and true wisdom of realization.<sup>68</sup> Although the wisdom of practice cannot directly bring forth realization, it is a necessary stage in order to attain realization.

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

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<sup>68</sup> In the original Chinese text, the term 有漏 (meaning "defiled") is paired with the wisdom of practice, while the term 無漏 (meaning "undefiled") is used to describe the true wisdom of realization. To avoid confusing the reader, these adjectives have been omitted in the English version. In Chinese, when the word "defiled" is used to modify wisdom it indicates that the practitioner has not yet cut off all afflictions and, as such, is still within the cycle of life and death.

## 11. Accomplishing the Cultivation of Wisdom

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

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

#### *Three Wisdoms and the Virtues That Arise with Them*

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

First is the accomplishment of the wisdom of learning. This is when right views and the foundation of faith are both established.<sup>69</sup> Beginners on the path, through the process of broad and repeated learning, delve deep into the Buddha-dharma and accomplish the wisdom of learning. Because they can properly understand the triple gem and the noble doctrines relating to the truth<sup>70</sup> and hold right views, their faith in the triple gem and noble doctrines becomes strong and unwavering. When Buddhist practitioners accomplish the wisdom of learning or become equipped with the foundation of faith, even if they are tormented by defamation, threats, and attacks, their faith will not waver in the slightest. Even if they find themselves in the age of the dharma's deterioration or in a place where Buddhism is in decline and where no one believes in Buddhism, they will be able to keep their faith and practice on their own. When we truly immerse ourselves deep in the Buddha-dharma and are equipped with right views, our faith in the Buddha-dharma is not determined by the faith of those around us or by the popularity of Buddhism. In the cultivation of wisdom, the first step is to develop

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<sup>69</sup> There are varying levels of right view and faith. Here, “established” is referring to the initial level, which is still not at the level of the sages.

<sup>70</sup> Understanding the noble doctrines relating to the truth properly means that the practitioner's understanding aligns with the three dharma seals or the one dharma seal (see section 9: Object of Contemplation for Insight Meditation).

right views and deep faith, to such an extent that our faith is steadfast. This enables us to move forward courageously and never retreat, no matter the benefit or harm, gain or loss we may face.

Second is the accomplishment of the wisdom of contemplation. This also signifies the perfection of pure precepts. According to the *Mahāyāna* teachings, this stage is also where the virtues of compassion, generosity, tolerance, diligence, and so on are accomplished. In our cultivation of the Buddha-dharma, having right faith and right understanding (views) is but the first stage of accomplishment. Next, we have to apply them. That means we apply what we have faith in and understand so that the behaviors of our every action and thought comply with the righteous path of the Buddha-dharma. The wisdom of contemplation is the stage when all that we have learned, that we have faith in, and that we understand are converted into real actions. Even though the nature of this wisdom is to discern and investigate, it is not merely an activity that occurs in the mind. Rather, it is able to begin influencing our actions and speech, which can guide our behavior onto the right path. In the Buddhist teaching of the noble eightfold path, the first two are right view and right intentions. These are followed by right speech, actions, and livelihood. This tells us that when we have the right intentions (accomplishment of the wisdom of contemplation), all our actions and speech—even our economic livelihood and so on—will fall within the right tracks of the Buddha-dharma. This is the virtue of perfect precepts, which is brought about by accomplishing the wisdom of contemplation. In addition, for *Mahāyāna* practitioners, their practice of pure precepts is always aligned with a mind of compassion. Within the pure precepts, they are able to nurture their compassion. Likewise, only when the mind is fully equipped with compassion can we perfectly accomplish the pure *Mahāyāna* precepts. A compassionate mind and the practice of upholding pure precepts have a very close relationship.

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

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

In an earlier section, four ultimate aspects of true and perfect wisdom are discussed:<sup>71</sup>

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

These aspects become partially realized as the *Mahāyāna* wisdom is attained. For example, when the wisdom of learning is accomplished, this encompasses attaining the foundation of faith. In this stage, we have no doubts whatsoever about the triple gem and the noble doctrines relating to the truth. This is indeed the manifestation where faith and wisdom function as one. Next, when the wisdom of contemplation is accomplished, on account of the simultaneous accomplishment of the pure precepts, a deep and earnest vow of compassion is initiated. This becomes the wisdom unique to the *Mahāyāna*, where compassion and wisdom merge. Third, when the wisdom of practice is accomplished, it must be aligned with a mind that has attained concentration. This is the aspect where tranquility and wisdom are in balance. Last, when true wisdom is accomplished, the state where there is true wisdom to awaken to the truth is attained. At this point, there is no difference between true wisdom and the truth.<sup>72</sup> This is the highest state, where the sameness of truth and wisdom is realized. Once this stage is reached, all four aspects of true wisdom are perfectly attained.

### ***Conclusion***

It is clear that when the cultivation of wisdom is accomplished, the corresponding virtues are present. Similarly, all virtues need wisdom so that they can be perfected. If we want to attain deep, profound, and true wisdom but ignore [the virtues of] faith, precepts, compassion, and concentration [and so on], we will not succeed. It is just fanciful thinking. Nāgārjuna said, “If one aspires to realize emptiness but has no virtues of faith and no precepts as a foundation,

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<sup>71</sup> See section 7: The Ultimate Characteristics of Wisdom.

<sup>72</sup> This state is conventionally described in terms of the duality of subject and object, where the subject is the wisdom that can bring about realization, and the object is the truth that is to be realized. However, when practitioners experience this state—where true wisdom awakens to the truth—they actually transcend duality. Hence, there is no difference between the two.

their practice on emptiness is erroneous.” If the practice of emptiness does not align with the virtues of faith and precepts, one will fall into an evil pit and never attain liberation. This erroneous situation was definitely pointed out by Venerable Taixu in the past. In summary, the situation where one wants to develop wisdom but discards the numerous pure virtues is not in accord with either the *Śrāvakayāna* practice or the *Mahāyāna* practice.

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

In the process of developing wisdom, for most practitioners, the primary focus is on how to attain the state where realization of the transcendental truth is not separated from worldly phenomena. This is referred to as coherence between the conventional and the transcendental, or the harmony between phenomena and truth, or the nonobstruction between truth and phenomena. In other words, a key concern is how to merge ordinary daily life and the ultimate transcendental truth so that they are as one. However, in the early stages of attaining true wisdom, the realization unavoidably has more focus on the true nature of all dharmas [and less on their various aspects]. Therefore, after the initial true realization that all dharmas are empty by nature, we still need to continue our practice. The aim is to apply the truth that we realize to the investigation of all aspects of phenomena. Only then can we apply the realization of the truth to understanding the world so that we can be free from attachments and depart from erroneous perceptions that are deep and firm. Finally, we can attain the state where there is perfect harmony and coherence between truth and phenomena. In this way, the realization of the truth and the worldly undertakings—that is, our everyday lives and the truth—are always in alignment.

#### ***Attention to the Expansion of Wisdom***

It is true we need to understand that the primary focus is to realize the state where the transcendental truth and worldly phenomena are not separate. However, in the *Mahāyāna* cultivation of wisdom, we also have to attend to the expansion of wisdom. Although the three wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice are yet to be accomplished, we should learn all sorts of worldly skills and subjects of benefit to our lives and society. Of course, if the quality<sup>73</sup> of the Buddhist cultivation of learning, contemplation, and practice does not form the basis for learning these skills and subjects, they will merely remain as worldly knowledge and unrelated to the Buddhist practice. Essentially, a bodhisattva’s vow is to guide sentient beings; this is the bodhisattva’s main task. This must be based on a strong, all-encompassing vow to acquire all types of wholesome and useful knowledge, as well as to learn the innumerable worldly and transcendental dharma practices. Therefore, in the early stages of the path, bodhisattvas should undertake learning, contemplation, and practice. However, they should also seek understanding regarding different fields of interest as best as they can.

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<sup>73</sup> “Quality” is referring to the way in which the Buddhist three wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice must accord with the three dharma seals or the true dharma seal.

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

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

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