

Gradual Cultivation and Sudden Enlightenment

This talk was given by Grand Master Wei Chueh on December 22, 2001, at Buddha Gate Monastery.

President and vice president of the Buddha Gate Dharma Support Society, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen, we welcome you all. Today our topic will be "Gradual Cultivation and Sudden Enlightenment."

Different Paths to Buddhahood

What does gradual cultivation mean? It means gradual practice and attainment, going through the various stages of cultivation from a mortal all the way to becoming a Buddha. Just like going to school, we start from elementary school, go on to high school, college, eventually earning a doctorate degree. Climbing step by step, we ultimately perfect all virtues and merits and reach Buddhahood-this is called gradual cultivation.

What is sudden enlightenment? Being enlightened means that we are awakened to this present mind, this awareness, this bodhi mind that is originally pure. When enlightened, this mind is Buddha, this mind is the Way. Once awakened, we still need to maintain this enlightened understanding and practice until we achieve perfection. This means that whether we are in stillness or in motion, whether it is day or night, the mind is always free from clinging and delusion; it is always clear, mindful, and in command. Maintaining this enlightened state until perfection, until Buddhahood is reached, is the practice of sudden enlightenment. So, sudden enlightenment is to realize that if this present ordinary mind is free from any effort or pretension, then this very mind is wisdom, true suchness, the profound bodhi mind of the Tathagata (Buddha). When we are enlightened, then we realize that everyone possesses Buddha nature, that everyone can become a bodhisattva. We then realize how precious and real we are and that all human beings in this world are endowed with infinite hope and infinite life.

Gradual cultivation means to realize the "fundamental principle" by way of (perfecting our) actions. Sudden enlightenment means to realize the fundamental principle first and then perfect our actions. If we don't have the chance or causal conditions to practice sudden enlightenment then we can practice gradual cultivation. It may seem that gradual cultivation and sudden enlightenment are very different methods, but in fact they are compatible and not conflictive.

Relative and Absolute Truths

Buddhism is the truth of our life. There is only one ultimate truth. But there are also various conventional truths. For example, family ethics, school regulations, and social order are all different kinds of conventional truth. There are many conventional truths, but they change with time and space. However, the Buddha Dharma does not change with time and space. The Buddha Dharma is the truest of all truths. The principle of gradual cultivation and sudden enlightenment is the truest of all truths in Buddhism.

Worldly laws or truths change with time and space because they are relative truths. For example, what is considered good and correct in the United States may not be the case in Mainland China or Taiwan. This is because in the United States, in China, and in Taiwan, lifestyles, cultures, and histories are different. In some places, such as Afghanistan and some tribes in China, a husband can have several wives, while most other countries believe in monogamy. Who is right? Who is wrong? It is not easy to determine. This is because with different times and in different places, the nature of this kind of ethics, culture, or history changes. This is called relative truth.

The truth that we want to discuss today doesn't change with time and space; it is the same in the past as it is in the present day. This truth is that everyone has this mind, this sentient mind, regardless of race, age or gender. Everywhere in the world, everyone in the past, present or future has this mind. This is a fact. It is the Absolute. The *Platform Sutra* of the Sixth Patriarch states that, "In terms of space, there are east, west, north, and south; in terms of people, there are rich, poor, noble, and common; but this mind that everyone has is neither in the east, west, north nor south; neither rich, poor, noble nor common; neither male, female, old nor young." So this is an absolute truth. We say that everyone has life; everyone wants to stay alive and is afraid of death. We all want to be happy and to avoid suffering. In this respect everyone is the same. So the sutras tell us that everyone can be a bodhisattva or a Buddha since everyone has this mind, this awareness. Because of this, we should cherish and take care of ourselves, and we also should respect and care for the lives of others.

Even though we all have this mind or awareness, the level of wisdom and compassion that emanates from each being is different. Why are there such differences? If some people are wiser than others, it doesn't mean that they have more awareness than others; it just means that their minds are clearer. They are less discriminative, and have less vexations and delusions. When people don't have a high level of wisdom, they have more deviant views and more attachments that delude the mind. So we should understand that everyone is equal in their inherent awareness, but we have varying degrees of ignorance and vexations that determine how wise we are, how rich or poor we are, how happy or unhappy we are. It can even affect our life span. If we wish to reach the highest state, we need to practice Buddhism diligently.

The Four Stages of Achievement

There are four different levels of achievement leading to the highest state. The first level is that of the arhat. The arhat's wisdom and awakening are much higher than those of the ordinary being. The second level is called the pratyekabuddha. The pratyekabuddha's wisdom and mind surpass those of the arhat. The third level is called the bodhisattva. The bodhisattvas wisdom surpasses that of the pratyekabuddhas if they can remove the "ignorance of Dharmas" (lacking in insight and knowledge of different Dharma paths) so they can liberate all beings. Finally, the fourth level is that of the Tathagata or the Buddha. The Buddha has eradicated all the three different kinds of ignorance (the ignorance of erroneous views and habits, the ignorance of Dharmas, and the ignorance of beginningless delusion) and has reached perfection. Arhat, pratyekabuddha, bodhisattva, and Buddha are the four kinds of saints in Buddhism, each one having achieved a higher level of enlightenment. Only the Buddha's enlightenment is the most complete. What does it mean to be a saint, a holy one? It means that if the mind, this very mind that is listening to the lecture now, can purify its afflictions and eradicate its attachments, then

this mind is exactly the same as the mind of the Buddha. How do we reach the state of the Tathagata or Buddhahood? There are two paths: the first is gradual cultivation and the second is sudden enlightenment.

The Path of Gradual Cultivation

The path of gradual cultivation is to practice the six paramitas-charity, moral conduct, tolerance, diligence, meditation, and prajna wisdom. These are the vows and conducts of the bodhisattva. By perfecting these six paramitas, one will reach Buddhahood. One must achieve perfection both in terms of time and in terms of merit. In terms of time, it is like going to school; it takes so many years to complete elementary school, high school, college, and so on. Besides the time it takes, one also needs to finish the required courses; this is equivalent to perfecting the merit. In terms of time, it takes a bodhisattva three *asamkheya* kalpas (eons) to reach perfection. In terms of merit, the six paramitas need to be completed.

What are three *asamkheya* kalpas? A kalpa is a measurement of time much longer than a million or even a billion years. There are three different kinds of kalpas: the small, middle and large kalpas. What is a small kalpa? Originally, the life span of a human being is 84,000 years. On average, every one hundred years, human life span decreases by one year until the average life span is only ten years. Then, every hundred years it will increase by one year until it reaches 84,000 years again. This whole span is called one small kalpa. A middle kalpa is equal to twenty small kalpas. Four middle kalpas complete the four stages of the life of the universe: creation, duration, deterioration, and emptiness. A large kalpa is equal to four middle kalpas, which is one cycle of the universe. It takes countless large kalpas to make one "*asamkheya*" kalpa and it takes three *asamkheya* kalpas to complete the path of a bodhisattva. It takes that long for a bodhisattva to perfect the six paramitas.

Charity Paramita

Charity is the first of the six paramitas. How does one perfect the charity paramita? Contrary to what some may think, donating a million or even a billion dollars doesn't constitute the perfection of charity. Aside from the giving of money and property, we need to be willing to give up everything we own, even our life, in order to perfect the charity paramita. In his previous lives, charity was the first thing that Sakyamuni Buddha practiced. In order to save a dove, he cut off his own flesh to feed an eagle; he fed himself to hungry tigers so they wouldn't starve to death. These are examples of giving up one's life for others.

In a previous lifetime, when the Buddha was a prince, there was a drought in the country and people were starving. He gave all the treasures and food in the palace to the people. His father, the king, became worried and told his son, "If you continue giving this way, there'll be nothing left in the palace and our reign will come to an end!" So the king expelled the prince from the palace. Even though he was exiled and owned nothing, the prince still wanted to help the people. He remembered that the dragon king of the ocean had a Mani pearl, which can fulfill all of one's wishes. He tried many ways to obtain the Mani pearl from the dragon king but failed. In desperation, he set forth to empty the ocean water. Drawing the water with buckets day after day, he exhausted himself and finally fainted. His sincerity deeply moved the four heavenly kings

who then proceeded to help him; with their powers they emptied half of the ocean in half an hour. The dragon king, startled and moved by the sincerity of the prince, voluntarily gave the Mani pearl to the prince. This is an example of trying to perfect the charity paramita. Every other paramita needs to be perfected, and this takes three asamkheya kalpas. In addition, another hundred small kalpas are needed to perfect the thirty-two physical marks and eighty fine characteristics of the Buddha.

The sutras describe the thirty-two marks of the Buddha. An example is brahma-sound, which means that when he speaks, people of all different dialects are able to understand him; Chinese-, Japanese-, English-speaking people and even animals are able to understand his words without any translation. Another mark of the Buddha is that anything he eats always tastes excellent. In contrast, we have to season our food for it to taste good to us.

Within each of the thirty-two marks, there are eighty fine features and it takes great merits to accomplish each of these marks. What does it take to accomplish the merits for one mark of the Buddha? We consider deeds such as building a temple or saving a life to be of great merit, but these are very far from the merits of the Buddha. The scripture says that if everyone in the world were sick and dying, and you cured them all with your medicine, that is an example of the merits needed to attain one of these marks of the Buddha. We can see that it is not easy to do these great deeds, to complete the six paramitas, to cultivate for three asamkheya kalpas, and to become a Buddha.

The Method of Sudden Enlightenment

The Buddha knew that many people would think that this was a long and difficult path, so he taught us another method--sudden enlightenment of the true mind and directly realizing Buddhahood, which doesn't take three asamkheya kalpas. This is the method of sudden enlightenment. An analogy is education--normally one starts from elementary school and gradually reaches college. But some smart students can skip grades in high school and go directly to college.

I believe that after having heard of gradual cultivation and sudden enlightenment, all of you will probably want to practice the sudden enlightenment method. Sakyamuni Buddha had to go through three asamkheya kalpas and he doesn't want us to suffer the same way unnecessarily. That is exactly what we will be teaching in the seven-day Zen retreat. You will learn how to realize the true nature of the mind and become a Buddha.

The Four Stages of Thought

Sudden enlightenment is to understand, as the sutra says, "A mind free from mundane defilement is the way to supreme enlightenment." That is, the ordinary mind is the Buddha mind. Everyone has a mind, but with all the thoughts in your mind, which mind is the Buddha? For example, when you are thirsty, the thought of wanting to drink water arises. When you see a cup of water, the thought of picking up the cup arises, and when you take a sip, the thought of picking up the cup has ceased and it is the thought of drinking that is in your mind. When you first take a sip, the thought, "This is great!" arises. When you take the second sip, the feeling becomes less

enjoyable, and when you take the third sip, the water tastes plain and you don't want to drink it anymore. By this time the thought of drinking the water has ceased. Then you see a cookie in front of you so another thought arises, "I want to eat the cookie." In every single thought there are four stages--arising, staying, changing, and ceasing.

Each day of our lives so many thoughts arise. Our mind is always going somewhere; we either have good thoughts or bad thoughts, random thoughts or delusive thoughts; they are like the waves of the ocean, like bubbles on the waves that come and go so quickly. All day long our mind never rests; even at night, it dreams and doesn't rest. Dreaming means our mind is clinging. The sutra says that each day and night 840 million thoughts go by. In fact, each thought that comes and goes is like a dream. When we say life is like a dream it is not a mere allegory; we are literally living in dreams. Every day we dream about new cars or dancing or playing mahjong; we dream about money, lust or power. These are our dreams when we are awake. Because we are always dreaming during the day, when we are supposed to rest at night, we continue to dream about the events of the day. When the mind is not dreaming then it is asleep. So we can see that half of our life is spent on sleeping and the other half is spent on dreaming--these are attachments and delusions, two big afflictions in Buddhism

Observe the four stages of thought. When we want to drink water, the thought of drinking water arises; when we pick up the cup, the thought of drinking is staying; when we take one and then two sips and our feelings start to change, that is changing; finally we decide we don't want to drink anymore and the thought goes away. Because every thought goes through these four stages, because our thoughts have births and deaths, that is why in our lives we go through the cycle of birth, aging, illness, and death. That is also why this world comes into being, persists for some time, but eventually deteriorates and becomes empty. This earth is in the "staying" stage now, but it is always changing; many other planets and stars are also aging, and one day this universe will perish. All humans, animals, and plants go through these four stages.

In order to become free from the agony of endless cycles of living, growing old, getting sick, and dying, the mind must be free from arising, staying, changing, and ceasing. To accomplish that we need to realize the bodhi mind, the original nature. The *Platform Sutra* of the Sixth Patriarch states, "Without realizing the original mind, all Dharma learning is in vain." If we don't realize the bodhi mind, the profound, lucid, true mind, then all of our practice merely brings blessings that, although pleasant, are nevertheless impermanent. This will not help us much in attaining enlightenment. So, what is enlightenment? It means to understand the mind. Where is this mind, the very mind that is listening to the lecture now?

Functions of the Mind

We can understand this mind from three different perspectives: from its function, from its characteristics, and from its essence. How big is our mind? Everything in the past, present, and future is contained in this mind. The world in all directions, north, south, east, and west, above and below, all space and time are within our mind. The mind is infinite; it has no boundaries. There is a well-known Chinese saying that the mind knows no distance. The mind can function regardless of distance, whether far or near. For example, with the war on terrorism that is going on right now, the United States and other countries have sent troops to Afghanistan. Families of

the soldiers back home may be very worried. One night the wife may dream that her husband is sick. She calls and finds out that the soldier is indeed sick. Why is this? It is because the mind knows no distance. No matter how far, whether separated by mountains or oceans, the mind can still function. When the mind is constantly thinking about something, we reach a certain level of concentration that can be powerful enough to overcome physical boundaries. We sleep in a small bed but the mind can dream of mountains and oceans and vast space. Sometimes you have good dreams where you are very happy and when you wake up it all vanishes. When you have a nightmare, the fear you have is very real. Your dreams seem so real but in fact they are really intangible. These are all the functions of the mind. A blind person can walk using a walking stick. There are blind artists who can create sculptures. This is what the mind can do when it is very concentrated. This mind is very profound and subtle. People are used to using their eyes to look outward and their ears to listen to outside sounds. If we can learn to look inward and listen within, we will be able to reach tranquility and peace very quickly.

There once was a Chinese man who had severe arthritis and had been bedridden for over eight years. One day the house suddenly caught fire and everyone in his family grabbed their precious belongings and escaped outside. After the house burned down, they suddenly remembered that the sick man was still inside the house. Surely he was killed! Everyone felt very sorry and mourned for him. Suddenly, they heard the man yelling from a hill asking them to carry him down. Surprised, they asked him how he got up there in the first place. He said that when he saw the fire, he forgot about his arthritis and ran up the hill! They said, "If you could run up, you can come down the same way." He said, "But my arthritis hurts so badly that I cannot move!" The mind is very powerful if we can learn to focus it..

Practicing the Dharma and meditation teaches us how to focus and use our mind. To use this mind properly we need to awaken the mind. Once awakened, we can purify the mind. Then we can return to the original source. That is why we have a saying, " To enlighten the mind is to realize the true nature; to realize the true nature is to become a Buddha." Once enlightened, one is the Buddha; unenlightened, one is a mortal. If the mind has vexations and creates bad karmas then one falls into the suffering realms; if the mind has evil views then one becomes the devil.

Purity of the Mind

I think that everyone wants to realize the true nature of the mind. Where is this mind? In fact, this mind is right here, all of it is ever-present. The great Zen master Bodhidharma has said, "In your eyes, it is called seeing; in your ears, it is called hearing; in your nose, you can smell the fragrance; in your tongue, you can detect the sweetness, sourness, and all the flavors; in your hands you can grab things, and in your feet it is the walking." These are all functions of the mind. So if everyone already has this mind, why can't we all become Buddhas? It is because of our delusions and attachments. If we can get rid of these two problems, our mind will be like still water or like a clear mirror; our mind can radiate light and move the earth. People use their eyes to look at the outside world; when we see the good and the bad then we start to discriminate and mental afflictions arise. When our ears hear others praising us, we are overjoyed, and when others criticize us, we become angry. So, afflictions and prejudice often arise from the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and consciousness. In this way our mind is like a pool of muddy water, unable to produce great power, unable to function wisely. It is important for us to reflect and

examine ourselves. When our eyes see things we should not cling to them; when receiving praise we should not be overjoyed; when slandered we should not be upset. At all times the mind remains calm and peaceful. This is what the *Diamond Sutra* says, "Let the mind function without abiding." When our six sense organs (eyes, ears, .consciousness) are in contact with the six "dusts" (form, sound, . dharmas), we will know what is right or wrong; we will know what is bad or good and yet the mind is not polluted. We are fully aware yet we do not crave or cling to things. In this way our senses revert to purity.

A Zen master once said that Zen practice is to "Walk through a flower field / without a single leaf clinging on you." What does that mean? It means that everywhere we go and in everything we do, the mind is free from attachment and delusions. We are aware but we do not cling. This is how we purify the mind and our sense organs. This is called "sitting on the platform of white lotuses". The lotus blossom comes out of dirty muddy water but it is very pristine and pure. Our mind should be like that, rising from impurities but free from contamination.

A Bird's Buddha Nature

Another story will help you realize that this awareness is the Buddha nature. Do not have a single trace of doubt, because if you do, it will be difficult to attain enlightenment. There was devout Buddhist whose name was Pei Du; he was a great benefactor and studied Buddhism in depth. One day he was in the great Xiang Guo Monastery, and saw that a sparrow landed on top of the Buddha statue's head, left his droppings and flew away. Pei Du was very disturbed by this scene and thought, "The scriptures say that every sentient being, which certainly includes the sparrow, has Buddha nature, so how can this bird leave its droppings on the Buddha's head?" So Pei Du asked the abbot of the temple for an explanation. The abbot replied that certainly the sparrow has Buddha nature. Indeed it is very intelligent; it knows that Buddha is very compassionate, that is why it left its droppings on the head of the Buddha instead of leaving it on the head of a hawk! The fact that the sparrow knows where it is safe and where it is not, this "knowing" is its Buddha nature. Don't think that Buddha nature is something too remote or too profound to understand; it is just this mind which knows and which is aware. Everyone has this mind that can distinguish good from evil, right from wrong; it is just that this mind is often deluded and beset with afflictions, thus generating karma that makes us suffer and lose our calm and peace. This is the mind of an ordinary person. If you are absolutely sure that you have this Buddha nature then you are enlightened.

Maintaining the Enlightened Mind

Once enlightened, we need to maintain this Buddha nature so that it will always manifest. We can practice in two ways-in stillness and in motion. "We cultivate it in stillness, and fortify it in motion." To practice stillness the Zen-7 retreat gives us the best opportunity. Throughout the seven days, we try to keep this awareness clear, unscattered, and in control for 3 minutes, 5 minutes and longer; practicing this way, we will definitely make immense progress. In the *Shurangama Sutra* it states, "Enlightenment is simply when the deluded mind rests." The word "rest" is very important. Our mind is always "going," so in sitting meditation we let the mind rest and remain unmoved; we do not think about the past, the present or the future. When we think about the past, we cling to the past; when we think about the present and the future, we cling to

the present and the future. The *Diamond Sutra* states, "The past mind is intangible, the present mind is intangible, the future mind is intangible." The past is already past, there is no way that we can get it back; therefore, it is useless to reminisce about the past. If the past was pleasant, thinking about it makes us sad. If the past was sad, thinking about it just adds to our suffering. There is no need to think about the present, it is so fleeting; and speculating about the future is just dreaming.

So where should the mind be? It should "function without abiding." The past is intangible, so do not dwell in the past; the present is intangible, so do not dwell on the fleeting moment; the future is intangible, so do not speculate about the future. Thus this mind is clear and without deception; it is the profound mind of the Tathagata; it is the original mind, our original nature. If you can maintain this enlightened state of mind for one minute, for three minutes or for ten minutes then you are a Buddha for one minute, three minutes or ten minutes. This is called "maintaining the holy womb." If you can practice this way then you are truly on the Path.

Many people want to practice but they don't know where the path is. There are many ways of practicing, such as chanting the sutras, repenting, performing good deeds, and sitting meditation. If we practice all of these without realizing the true mind, we are just doing preliminary cultivation. Because our ignorance and attachment are deeply rooted, we need to practice these virtuous acts to help us temporarily get rid of the pollutants in our mind. If we continue practicing this way, when the time is right, our original nature will suddenly manifest and we will become enlightened, enlightened to this mind of non-abidance. The non-abiding mind is the absolute truth. It transcends time and space. In just one instant, we can realize our original mind, the mind of the instant-it feels utterly tranquil, clear and pure, and hours can pass in what seems like a moment. As the ancient saying goes, "Living in the mountain / there is no sense of time / meanwhile in the mundane world / a thousand years have passed." "No sense of time" refers to this absolute mind, where time and space do not exist. This is to go beyond this world. To go beyond this world is not something that happens after death. If we realize this original mind, we are immediately transformed from the mundane to the divine, and this world becomes the Pure Land. The *Platform Sutra* of the Sixth Patriarch states, "Having the right view is to transcend this world. Having deviant views is to remain in the mundane world." This is truly the ultimate right view, the enlightened understanding of the Tathagata.

Because of the nuances of the mind, the world that we perceive is also different. For example, this lecture hall is bright when we turn on the light; it becomes dark when we turn off the light. Is this room dark or bright? Here in the United States it is daytime right now, but in Taiwan it is nighttime. Is it daytime or nighttime now? During the day, humans see more clearly than at night. Yet there are many animals that see more clearly at night. All the different phenomena that we perceive are due to our awareness, our mind that perceives differently under varying conditions.

A famous Confucian poem says, "Calmly observe / and the myriad phenomena become self-evident. / Nature narrates itself perfectly." If the mind can quiet down then you'll naturally understand many principles. If the mind is scattered and restless then it is like trying to admire the flowers while riding away on a horse, you won't be able to discern anything. Therefore,

"Sudden awakening to the original mind and directly becoming a Buddha" is really very important, very relevant to our lives and to our living.

Unifying the Gradual and Sudden Practices

I think many people are beginning to understand the nature of this mind; however, this mind is still very restless and cluttered; it never stops thinking about the past, the present, and the future; it is endlessly worrying about this and that. This is a habit because all our lives we have never stopped our mind for ten minutes. This practice is quite alien to most of us. But now we understand this Way, it is a spiritual path we must each walk by ourselves.

Everyday, our mind has many scattered thoughts, and when it doesn't, it dozes off; when the mind is neither scattered nor in slumber then it is bored; these are three biggest problems of the mind. When we try different practices to overcome these problems, then we are using the method of gradual cultivation. Once we overcome them we need to let go of the methods that we use and just keep the awareness (this is the method of sudden enlightenment). If we understand this then we will always know how to practice. Either the method of sudden enlightenment or that of gradual cultivation will benefit us. The scripture says that everyone can become a Buddha. This is not just an ideal or an exaggeration. Indeed everyone truly can become a Buddha; everyone can change from the mundane to the divine. As long as we have persistence, faith, and great vow, we will definitely come to solid terms with ourselves, making our lives more fulfilling, more meaningful, and we will truly realize infinite light and infinite life.

I'll give a final example to prove the case in point. In the classroom, a teacher explains the course material clearly and interestingly, and the student listens attentively. For the student, time and space seem to disappear; even when a mosquito is biting him he doesn't realize it. Suddenly the bell rings and he can't believe that this class has ended so soon. On the other hand, if the teacher just reads from a book but doesn't explain clearly, and the student neither understands nor cares to understand, the student will then look to the left and right and at his watch wondering why the class hasn't ended yet. In the same classroom within the same hour, why is there such difference in feelings? It is because the mind is discriminating. When the mind is restless, time seems very long. When the mind is concentrated, an hour passes like a single moment.

The sutra states, "If you put your mind in one place, it can accomplish anything." The Zen practice is to put the mind back into the Oneness, to make us realize our true nature. If we have many worries, vexations or gripes, then living one day is like living a whole year. On the other hand, if we have a tranquil and open mind, abiding in purity and in the unborn and undying absolute state, then one day, one year, a hundred years or a thousand years will feel just like an instant. Buddhism is the highest truth, the highest state of existence. If you have faith and persistence in following this path, you will find what you truly want. Life will become more meaningful and fulfilling, and you will find true blessing and happiness. Finally, I wish everyone good health, happiness, and peace, and that all will bring forth the bodhi mind and never regress.