

Meditation in the three vehicles and Patriarchal Chan

Thích Duy Lực

Question: What are the meditation of the Lesser Vehicle, the Middle Vehicle, the Great Vehicle, and Patriarchal Chan?

Answer: I specialize in teaching Patriarchal Chan. I have not studied the other schools of meditation, but I can describe them briefly according to my understanding. The THREE VEHICLES are the vehicle of the hearers, or śrāvakas, called the Lesser Vehicle; the vehicle of those awakened through conditions, or pratyekabuddhas, called the Middle Vehicle; and the bodhisattva vehicle, called the Great Vehicle. The Sixth Patriarch, however, calls the method of meditative investigation the Supreme Vehicle.

THE HEARER VEHICLE

Its foundation for practice is the Four Noble Truths: suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path. Suffering arises from the deluded mind. By cultivating the path, including the five contemplations that settle the mind, one attains the nirvāṇa of the Lesser Vehicle, the fruit of arhatship.

These five contemplations are counting the breath, the impurity of the body, causes and conditions, loving-kindness and compassion, and the six consciousnesses. The choice depends on what suits each person. For example, someone who cherishes the body may contemplate its impurity in order to become disenchanted with it; someone whose mind is scattered may practice counting the breath, and so on. The hearer vehicle requires the thirty-seven factors supporting awakening to break attachment to self. In the true Dharma, attachment to self must always be broken before realization can occur.

THE VEHICLE OF THOSE AWAKENED THROUGH CONDITIONS

Its basis is meditation on the twelve links of dependent arising, beginning with IGNORANCE and ending with the twelfth link, AGING AND DEATH. Ignorance conditions FORMATIONS, bringing continual change; formations are associated with the discriminations of CONSCIOUSNESS, and the process continues through BIRTH to AGING AND DEATH. One contemplates that when ignorance ceases, formations cease, then consciousness, and so on: when birth ceases, aging and death also cease. One thereby realizes the fruit of a pratyekabuddha.

THE BODHISATTVA VEHICLE

Also called the Great Vehicle, it is generally associated with Tathāgata meditation. In China, the Great Vehicle has eight schools; four are discussed here in connection with Tathāgata meditation.

1. The Tiantai school

Based on the Lotus Sūtra, it is also called the Lotus school. Its meditation is calming and contemplation, comprising three kinds of calming and three contemplations.

The three kinds of calming are:

- a. Calming by fastening the mind to an object. The deluded mind is like a monkey, constantly restless. It is tethered to the lower cinnabar field, below the navel.
- b. Calming in response to circumstances and objects. For example, when eating, one thinks, “What merit do I have to eat this meal?” When putting on clothes, “What merit do I have to wear these clothes?” and so forth.
- c. Calming through recognition of the real. The real is authentic and not illusory. Our own nature is originally free from delusion, opposition, and all these discriminations. Under the influence of the deluded mind, all sorts of oppositions and distinctions arise. By investigating the real, one does not fall into such oppositions, the four logical propositions, and so on.

The three contemplations are emptiness, provisional existence, and the middle. One contemplates that all phenomena in the universe are provisionally constructed and empty in their essential nature. Yet regarding the provisional as EXISTENCE and emptiness as NONEXISTENCE still creates an opposition; therefore the middle way must be contemplated. But if there is no opposition, how could there still be a middle way? Ultimately, the middle way must also be swept away.

Calming is commonly called concentration, and contemplation wisdom. Although we speak of three kinds of calming and three contemplations, they are not actually divided into earlier and later stages: they occur together. We must not favor concentration over wisdom, or wisdom over concentration; both must be present at the same time and in balance. When the mind is scattered, apply calming; when it becomes dull and drowsy, apply contemplation.

2. The Xianshou or Huayan school

Based on the Flower Ornament Sūtra, it is also called the Huayan school. Its meditation is contemplation of the Dharma realm, in four stages: the realm of principle, the realm of phenomena, the realm of nonobstruction between principle and phenomena, and the realm of nonobstruction among all phenomena. Accomplishing this contemplation brings realization of the “one true Dharma realm.”

The realms of principle and phenomena: consider a house made of wood, bricks, tiles, iron, and so forth. Each material is distinct, but their common principle is to form a house. The labor and the materials used to build it are the phenomena. Principle without phenomena cannot make a house, nor can phenomena without principle.

Nonobstruction between principle and phenomena: once the house is built, the wood is also the house, and the tiles are also the house. Integrated into the building, all the parts can be called the house. Yet tiles remain tiles, wood remains wood, and bricks remain

bricks. Each retains its differences while being integrated as part of the house. This is called nonobstruction between principle and phenomena.

Nonobstruction among phenomena: once the house is complete, people move in. Doors allow entry and exit, and neither sunshine nor rain prevents its use. This is called nonobstruction among phenomena.

3. The Three Treatises school

It is based on three patriarchal treatises: the Hundred Verse Treatise, the Treatise on the Twelve Gates, and the Treatise on the Middle Way. Its meditation is analytical contemplation of emptiness.

4. The Consciousness Only school

Also called the Cien school, it practices contemplation of the four investigations.

This is only a brief account of these schools; each has its own method of meditation. In fact, even among Tiantai masters, few practice calming and contemplation. In more recent times, Master Tanxu, a disciple of Master Dixian, said, “In doctrinal exposition, teach Tiantai; in practice, return to the Pure Land.” The masters of the Xianshou school do likewise.

The great master Zhiyi attained realization through calming and contemplation, but not its ultimate completion. Shortly before his death, when someone asked what level he had attained, he replied that he had reached only the five grades. Since then, one rarely hears of further attainments in this practice, and even less in contemplation of the Dharma realm. If these four Great Vehicle schools reach their ultimate realization, this is Tathāgata meditation. According to the Śūraṅgama Sūtra, Tathāgata meditation also comprises fifty-seven stages.

PATRIARCHAL CHAN

Also called Bodhidharma meditation, it has been transmitted from one patriarch to the next. Śākyamuni Buddha taught for forty-nine years, yet said that he had never spoken a single word: those forty-nine years of teaching were a necessary response to circumstances, rather than the original mind itself. Finally, he held up a flower. Among the vast assembly of heavenly beings and humans, only Mahākāśyapa awakened, and the method of Patriarchal Chan was transmitted to him. Mahākāśyapa was the first patriarch; he transmitted it to Ānanda, the second. The twenty-eighth patriarch, Bodhidharma, brought it to China, which is why it is also called Bodhidharma meditation. As for how to practice the investigation of Patriarchal Chan, I have already explained it many times.

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ADDITIONAL NOTES INCLUDED IN THE SOURCE DOCUMENT

1. The Great Vehicle, literally “great vehicle,” is one of the two major currents of Buddhism, the other being called the Lesser Vehicle, or “small vehicle.”

Arising in the first century before the Common Era, this current calls itself the Great Vehicle because it draws on the diversity of teachings to open the path of awakening to a great many beings. Both the Lesser and Great Vehicles trace their origin to Śākyamuni Buddha, but differ in their practical and doctrinal concerns. The emblematic figure of the Great Vehicle is the bodhisattva, whose outstanding quality is compassion.

2. The Lesser Vehicle concentrates entirely on the path to liberation. Philosophical theories play no major role; they may even be regarded as obstacles to liberation. It clearly analyzes the human condition, the nature of things, and the structure of attachment to self, and points out the method of liberation from suffering, *duḥkha*. All the schools described in this way share a view of existing things: suffering is real, and one must be freed from it. Liberation from the cycle of rebirth, *saṃsāra*, freedom from rebirth, and the attainment of *nirvāṇa* are its highest aim. To achieve this, practitioners must rely on their own efforts and withdraw from worldly life. Hence the ideal of seclusion and a life devoted to religious practice.

Whereas the Lesser Vehicle is concerned with one's own awakening, representatives of the Great Vehicle seek liberation in order to save all beings, *sarvasattva*.