

# Signless Buddha Mindfulness

## P r e f a c e

For most Buddhist learners, the term “Buddha-mindfulness”<sup>1</sup> simply means the recitation of the sacred name of a particular Buddha or bodhisattva. With utmost faith, as well as continuous recitation, practitioners take refuge in Buddhas and bodhisattvas, hoping to obtain a connection with them either through subtle responses or visual manifestations. While most practitioners of Buddha-mindfulness recite the name of Buddha Amitābha, Buddha Amitābha’s Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss<sup>2</sup> is far from being the only pure land. There are countless pure lands manifested by Buddhas in the worlds of ten directions, including that of our Fundamental Teacher—Buddha Śākyamuni. A distinction should also be made between the Mind-Only Pure Land and the pure lands manifested by various Buddhas.

In a broad sense, all cultivation methods of Mahāyāna Buddhism fall within the scope of the Pure Land school’s Dharma-door of Buddha-mindfulness, including well-known practices such as recitation of Buddha’s name, mantra chanting, prostration,

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<sup>1</sup> C. *nianfo* 念佛; J. *nenbutsu*; K. *yōmbul*.

<sup>2</sup> S. *sukhāvātī*; T. *bde ba can*; C. *jīlè jīngtǔ* 極樂淨土; J. *gokurakujōdo*; K. *kūngnak chōngt’o*.

offering making, tranquility and insight meditation,<sup>3</sup> and observance of the precepts, as well as the chanting, copying, studying, expounding, reflecting on, and contemplating of scriptures. They are all geared toward learning the practices of Buddha, understanding the Dharma, attaining liberation, acquiring the meritorious qualities of Buddha, and ultimately, realizing the four types of pure land upon the attainment of Buddhahood.

The Pure Land tradition shares a close connection with the Chan school. To attain Buddhahood, a Pure Land practitioner cannot simply recite Buddha's name, but must draw upon the power of meditative concentration<sup>4</sup> to attain direct perception of the True Mind. The realization of the True Mind marks the entering into the Path of Vision<sup>5</sup> on the Bodhisattva Path, whereupon one can swiftly advance to the Path of Cultivation and bring within sight the eventual attainment of Buddhahood. However, to realize the True Mind, one must practice either Chan contemplation or the tranquility and insight meditation, specifically, the method of "contemplation of principle."<sup>6</sup> Both of these methods

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<sup>3</sup> S. *śamathavipaśyanā*; C. *zhiguan* 止觀.

<sup>4</sup> S. *samādhi*; C. *sanmei* 三昧.

<sup>5</sup> S. *darśanamārga*; C. *jiandao* 見道. The Bodhisattva Path is comprised of a total of fifty-two stages, divided into five progressive Paths according to the Yogācāra teaching: Accumulation, Preparation, Vision, Cultivation, and Ultimate Realization. The Path of Vision begins at the stage of Seventh Abiding and continues through to the initial phase of the First Ground. Before a practitioner can reach the Path of Vision, he or she has to make it through the Path of Accumulation and the Path of Preparation, and also directly realize the True Mind—the ultimate reality of all phenomena. For details, please refer to the chart of "The Cultivation Stages of the Two Paths within the Buddha Bodhi" at the back of this book.

<sup>6</sup> Chan contemplation stresses direct realization of the True Mind without relying on scriptural study. In contrast, the "contemplation of principle (C. *liguan* 理觀)" employs the tranquility and insight meditation as its means

call for a sufficient degree of meditative concentration, especially the ability to maintain meditative concentration while in physical motion.

The power of meditative concentration is highly essential to an adherent of the Pure Land tradition. If a Pure Land practitioner can practice the recitation of Buddha's name in conjunction with the prostration to Buddha as expedient techniques to build up his power of meditative concentration, he could easily train his mind to one-pointedness and enter Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta's Dharma-door for "perfect mastery through Buddha-mindfulness,"<sup>7</sup> an accomplishment that will help secure rebirth in the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. Alternatively, equipped with a decent power of meditative concentration, this practitioner may also choose to proceed to the practice of contemplative Buddha-mindfulness,<sup>8</sup> through which he could "spontaneously awaken to the True Mind without employing skillful means," as stated in the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*. If, instead, this practitioner applies his power of meditative concentration gained from the entry practice of Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta's Dharma-door of Buddha-mindfulness toward Chan contemplation, he could also awaken to the True Mind as the "gateless gate" will reveal itself spontaneously. This is how the practice of Pure Land crosses over to Chan.

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and relies on the reflection and investigation of the principle of emptiness or suchness—the nature of the True Mind—expounded in the scriptures to achieve direct realization of the ultimate reality.

<sup>7</sup> Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta's Dharma-door for "perfect mastery through Buddha-mindfulness (C. *nianfo yuantong famen* 念佛圓通法門)" is a method of signless mindfulness of Buddha illustrated in the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*. Please note that the signless mindfulness introduced in this book is only the entry-level practice of the Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta's profound Dharma-door.

<sup>8</sup> C. *canjiu nianfo* 參究念佛.

## Xiao Pingshi

In other words, if a Buddhist disciple cultivates the Dharma-door of the Pure Land following the essentials of samādhi cultivation, and uses the Pure Land methods to enhance his power of in-motion meditative concentration, he can make quick and equal progress in both Chan and Pure Land practices. I humbly put forth the above views for the sole purpose of benefiting all readers.

I would like to give a brief account of the events that led up to the writing of this book. At the beginning of 1987, my hectic work schedule allowed me no time for meditation at all. Every evening, I was extremely weary during my recitation of the *Diamond Sūtra*, and I usually concluded this daily routine with prostrations to the Buddha immediately after.

One summer evening that year, as I was prostrating to the Buddha, it suddenly occurred to me that I should drop the name and image of Buddha, and instead hold only a pure thought of Buddha during prostration. I tried it out right away. From that day on, I started to make prostrations while bearing only a thought of Buddha, a method I have since termed “signless Buddha-mindfulness.” As time went on, I became proficient in this practice. I was filled with Dharma-joy and was impermeable to the stress and fatigue of worldly living. Deriving so much joy from this practice, I even ceased my old evening routine, focusing instead on prostration with signless mindfulness of Buddha. During the rest of the day’s activities, I held a signless pure thought of Buddha in mind.

By the end of 1988, I wanted to share my Dharma-joy with fellow practitioners. I started to sift through my memory and jotted down every step I had taken to accomplish my practice. At the same time, I scoured and reviewed sūtras and treatises to locate scriptural verification of my method. Right before completing my writing, I came upon the section “Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta’s Dharma-

door for Perfect Mastery through Buddha-Mindfulness” in the *Śūramgama Sūtra*. I was elated when my eyes set upon the words “recollect and be mindful of Buddha.” As I read on and saw, “rein in all six sense faculties and abide in one continuous pure thought to enter samādhi,” I realized that my method was precisely the Dharma-door “of perfect mastery through Buddha-mindfulness” illustrated by Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta.

In April 1989, I compiled my notes into a short essay, entitled “A Discussion of Signless Buddha-Prostration and Buddha-Mindfulness.” After I finished the draft of this article, I came upon the writings of the Venerable Xuyun (虛雲和尚), and finally acquired a clear understanding of the principle and method of the guarding of a *huatou*.<sup>9</sup> Only then did I realize that, while I thought I was contemplating *huatou* and boldly claimed that I was doing so, I had been merely uttering words and observing their trail.

Why was I not able to contemplate *huatou* in my earlier attempts? It was simple: at the beginning, I didn’t have the ability to maintain a focused mind in motion. Only after I mastered signless Buddha-mindfulness was I able to maintain a focused mind in motion, and hence to contemplate *huatou*.

In the afternoon of August 6, 1989, I twice entered into a state of “seeing the mountain as not being mountain” during a group practice and experienced for the first time the state of the “dark

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<sup>9</sup> *Huatou* 話頭: literally “word head,” *huatou* refers to what comes before words. It should be noted that while *hua* means spoken words in Chinese, in the Chan context it should be understood as a thought or idea associated with linguistic contents or images. *Huatou*, therefore, refers to the wordless and imageless awareness preceding the formation of a thought. In the Chan school, the guarding and contemplation of *huatou* is a pedagogical device used to help practitioners uncover the True Mind.

barrel.”<sup>10</sup> After that, I wavered in and out of a mass of doubt. In early November of 1989, I decided to close my business and focus on Chan contemplation at home after I returned from a pilgrimage to India and Nepal. Around four o’clock in the afternoon of the second day of the eleventh lunar month in 1990, I broke free of the “dark barrel” and my striving in Chan contemplation finally ended.

In retrospect, I realized that the root cause of most practitioners’ lack of progress in their Dharma cultivation is the inability to maintain meditative concentration in motion. This book was written to help practitioners swiftly attain an undisturbed mind during their practice of Buddha-mindfulness. Once they develop this skill, they can quickly move on to the contemplation of *huatou* and *gong’an*.<sup>11</sup>

At the request of fellow practitioners, I gave a lecture on signless Buddha-mindfulness—the expedient way to enter Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta’s Dharma-door for “perfect mastery through Buddha-mindfulness”—once a week for three consecutive weeks beginning on September 3, 1991. These three lectures were held at the Chan center of the Buddhist society of a financial institution and at the Chens’ residence in Shipai, both located in Taipei.

There were thirty people in these two practice groups at the time. Most of them used recitation of Buddha’s name as their

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<sup>10</sup> The “dark barrel” refers to a state during Chan contemplation when one is so single-mindedly focused on the contemplation that one becomes oblivious to the external environment. At this point, however, the practitioner has not directly realized the True Mind.

<sup>11</sup> Gong’an 公案: this term, known as koan in Japanese, carries the literal meaning of “public case” or “precedent.” A gong’an in the Chan tradition typically consists of dialogues between a Chan master and his disciple(s). The function of gong’an is the same as that of *huatou*; a Chan practitioner is supposed to contemplate the meaning of gong’an without using any language or image in order to achieve sudden awakening to the True Mind.

practice method. By putting what they had learned from my lectures into practice, two of them were able to accomplish signless Buddha-mindfulness within a mere six weeks. After three months, six people had mastered this practice. As of today (February 28, 1992)<sup>12</sup>, thirteen people have mastered it less than six months. Still more people are joining in and making speedy progress. The rate of mastery and the speed of progress are very encouraging. Excluding those who did not practice prostration due to individual conditions, the main reason for the others' lack of progress was their aversion to this method and its preparatory expedient—namely, the recitation of Buddha's name. When they finally changed their minds after seeing that those who had mastered this method were starting to guard huatou and contemplate Chan, they were already three to four months behind. These results and observations excited me greatly. They showed that signless Buddha-mindfulness could definitely be mastered when facilitated by appropriate methods and practiced with continuous diligence. A feeling of compassion welled up from within, compassion that cannot bear to see the decline of the holy teachings and does not wish that sentient beings suffer, and so I made haste to complete the writing of this book during the winter break. My writing is far from elegant, but I try to articulate myself clearly and coherently. For easy comprehension, I wrote in a colloquial, direct, and somewhat repetitive style to get my points across. May all Buddhist practitioners master signless Buddha-mindfulness, be filled with Dharma-joy, spread this method to benefit countless beings, and enter the Ocean of the Vairocana Nature.

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<sup>12</sup> This book was originally written in Chinese and was first published in Taiwan in 1993.

Take refuge in our Fundamental Teacher Buddha  
Śākyamuni  
Take refuge in Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara of Great  
Compassion  
Take refuge in Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta

Xiao Pingshi  
A disciple of the Three Jewels  
February 28, 1992

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