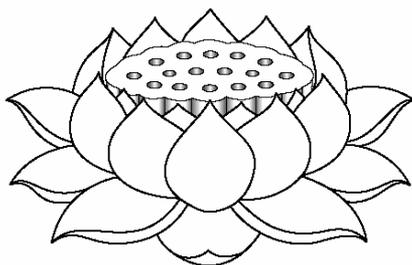


# THE ESSENCE OF MAHAYANA PRACTICE

達磨二入四行觀



Translated by the Chung Tai Translation Committee  
May 2008

From the Chinese by  
The First Patriarch Bodhidharma, 6th Century

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were used as references.

The Chung Tai Translation Committee comprises of Dharma Masters and lay disciples and convenes regularly. To view or download other sutra translations by CTTC, visit “Dharma Gems” on <http://sunnyvale.ctzen.org>. Comments and suggestions may be sent to [translation@ctzen.org](mailto:translation@ctzen.org)

Namo Fundamental Teacher Shakyamuni Buddha

南無本師釋迦牟尼佛

**SUTRA OPENING GATHA**

開經偈

The Dharma, infinitely profound and subtle,  
Is rarely encountered even in a million kalpas.  
Now we are able to hear, study, and follow it,  
May we fully realize the Tathagata's true meaning.

無上甚深微妙法 百千萬劫難遭遇  
我今見聞得受持 願解如來真實義

## **THE ESSENCE OF MAHAYANA PRACTICE**

by Master Bodhidharma

Complete title: “Great Master Bodhidharma’s Essential Discourse on  
Entering the Mahayana Path by Principle and by Practice”

To enter the Great Way there are many paths, but essentially they are of two means: by Principle and by Practice.

Entering the Way by Principle means to awaken to the Truth through the doctrine, with a deep faith that all sentient beings have the same true nature. Obscured by the fleeting dust of delusions, this nature cannot manifest itself. If one can relinquish the false and turn to the true, fix the mind in “wall meditation”, understand that there are neither self nor others, that mortals and saints are equal and one—abiding this way without wavering, clinging not even to the scriptures, then one is implicitly in accord with the Principle. Being non-discriminative, still, and empty of effort is to Enter by Principle.

Entering by Practice means following four practices that encompass all other practices. They are: accepting adversity, adapting to conditions, seeking nothing, and acting in accordance with the Dharma.

What is the practice of accepting adversity? When suffering, a practitioner of the Way should reflect: “For innumerable kalpas, I have pursued the trivial instead of the essential, drifted through all spheres of existence, created much animosity and hatred, maligned and harmed

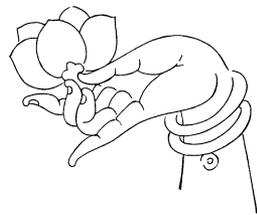
others endlessly. Even though now I have done no wrong, I am reaping the karmic consequences of past transgressions. It is something that neither the heavens nor other people can impose upon me. Therefore I should accept it willingly, without any resentment or objection.” The sutra says, “Face hardships without distress.” How? With thorough insight. With this understanding in mind, you are in accord with the Principle, advancing on the Way through the experience of adversity. This is called the practice of accepting adversity.

Second is the practice of adapting to conditions. Sentient beings are without a self, being steered by karmic conditions. Suffering and joy are experienced together as a result of causes and conditions. Any reward, blessing or honor is a consequence of past causes; nothing remains when the necessary conditions are exhausted. So what is there to be joyful about? Knowing that success and failure depend on conditions, the mind remains unmoved by the wind of joy, experiencing neither gain nor loss. This is to be in harmony with the Way. Therefore it is called the practice of adapting to conditions.

Third, to seek nothing. Ordinary people, in their perpetual ignorance, crave and form attachments to everything, everywhere. This is called seeking. The wise are awakened to the Truth, and choose reason over convention; even though their forms follow the law of causality, their minds are at peace and empty of effort. Since all existence is empty, there is nothing to be desired. Blessing and Darkness always follow each other. This long sojourn in

the Triple Realm is like living in a burning house; to have a body is to suffer, how can one attain peace? Those who understand this renounce all mundane existence, cease desires, and stop seeking. The sutra says, “To seek is to suffer, to seek nothing is bliss.” It follows that to seek nothing is to truly follow the Way. This is the practice of seeking nothing.

Fourth, to act in accordance with the Dharma. The principle of intrinsic purity is the Dharma. By this principle, all forms and characteristics are empty, without defilement and attachment, without self or others. The sutra says, “In the Dharma there are no sentient beings, because it is free of the impurities of sentient beings. In the Dharma there is no self, because it is free of the impurities of self.” When the wise believe in and understand this principle, they should also act in accordance with the Dharma. There is no parsimony in the Dharma, so practice the giving of body, life, and possessions without any reservation. Understand and achieve “triple emptiness”, with no reliance and no attachment. One liberates others without becoming attached to form, thus removing impurities. This benefits oneself, benefits others, and also glorifies the bodhi path. Dana is perfected this way; so are the other five paramitas. In order to relinquish delusions, one practices these six perfections, yet nothing is practiced. This is to act in accordance with the Dharma.



## **THE ESSENCE OF MAHAYANA PRACTICE**

by Master Bodhidharma

Complete title: “Great Master Bodhidharma’s Essential Discourse on  
Entering the Mahayana Path by Principle and by Practice”

### **菩提達磨大師略辨大乘入道四行觀**

To enter the Great Way there are many paths, but essentially they are of two means: by Principle and by Practice.

Entering the Way by Principle means to awaken to the Truth through the doctrine, with a deep faith that all sentient beings have the same true nature. Obscured by the fleeting dust of delusions, this nature cannot manifest itself.

夫入道多途，要而言之，不出二種：一是理入，二是行入。

理入者，謂藉教悟宗，深信含生同一真性，但為客塵妄想所覆，不能顯了。

**Mahayana 大乘.** The great (*maha*) vehicle (*yana*). It is the bodhisattva path which leads to Buddhahood. This involves devotion to the liberation of all beings and the perfection of wisdom.

**Bodhidharma 菩提達磨大師.** The 28<sup>th</sup> Zen (Chan) Patriarch of India, who founded the Zen school of Buddhism in China (and therefore is the first Zen Patriarch of China). This current text is one of the very few records we have of his teaching.

**enter the Great Way.** “Great Way” refers to the Mahayana path, the path to become a buddha and enlighten countless others. To enter the Great Way is to truly understand what it means to become a buddha.

**two means.** Even though there are many methods of Buddhist practice, they all use one of two means: either by gaining a direct understanding of the highest Truth (“by Principle”), or by using various practices that lead to the final understanding of the highest Truth (“by Practice”). Sometimes the two means are combined.

**by Principle.** This is the quintessential Zen practice, the “gateless gate”, the method of “directly seeing one’s nature and becoming a buddha.”

**doctrine.** Here it refers to the canon of Buddhist teaching; the Dharma; the scriptures and their commentaries; and the philosophy.

**deep faith.** Faith based on correct understanding of the Dharma, faith based on unbiased reasoning and experiences, as opposed to faith based on superstitions or unfounded beliefs.

**sentient beings.** All living beings with sentience; beings that have awareness. They include devas (gods or heavenly beings 天人), asuras (demi-gods 阿修羅), human beings, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings. Unlike buddhas and bodhisattvas, they are all trapped in samsara but have the potential to become buddhas.

**same true nature.** Though the appearances of sentient beings are different due to their past karma, their sentience (which is variously referred to as “mind,” “consciousness,” “awareness,” or “buddha nature,”) is fundamentally equal in nature. To be enlightened is to directly experience this fact.

**fleeting dust of delusions.** The original mind is like a mirror covered with the dust of delusions; therefore its reflections (of reality) are unclear and distorted. What we take as our “body and mind”—form, feeling, conception, volition, and consciousness—are the fleeting dust which is impermanent and defiling, obscuring our true nature. Ignorance, greed, anger, pride, jealousy, and other afflictions are also the “fleeting dust of delusions.”

If one can relinquish the false and turn to the true, fix the mind in “wall meditation”, understand that there are neither self nor others, that mortals and saints are equal and one—abiding this way without wavering, clinging not even to the scriptures, then one is implicitly in accord with the Principle. Being non-discriminative, still, and empty of effort is to Enter by Principle.

Entering by Practice means following four practices that encompass all other practices. They are: accepting adversity, adapting to conditions, seeking nothing, and acting in accordance with the Dharma.

若也捨妄歸真，凝住壁觀，無自無他，凡聖等一。堅住不移，更不隨文教，此即於理冥符；無有分別，寂然無為，名之理入。

行入謂四行，其餘諸行，悉入此中。何等四耶。一報冤行，二隨緣行，三無所求行，四稱法行。

**wall meditation.** "Wall" represents firmness, resolve, immovability, and stability. "Fix the mind in wall meditation" means to practice meditation so that the mind is unaffected by all afflictions and distractions, and to gain clear vision to penetrate delusions.

**neither self nor others.** The separation or boundary between oneself and others (or the external world) is illusive.

**mortals and saints.** "Mortals" refers to ordinary beings, beings subject to rebirth in samsara (world with suffering). "Saints" refers to arhats, bodhisattvas and buddhas who have attained liberation, are pure in mind and action, and have transcended death.

**abiding this way.** To be mindful of this Principle without being affected by doubt or afflictions.

**cling not even to the scriptures.** Scriptures are important as they provide guidance to enlightenment, but they can be misinterpreted or taken too literally. Also to study them as philosophy without practice will not lead to true understanding.

**implicitly in accord.** Even though one may not fully understand the Principle yet, by being mindful of this teaching and acting accordingly, one is in harmony with the Way, leading oneself eventually to enlightenment.

**non-discriminative.** To be in a state of mind free from all sources of discrimination and ultimately attaining a mind of non-duality. Even "good" distinctions are dualistic notions that are undesirable in the realm of Absolute Truth.

**still.** Stillness means free from disturbances. An unenlightened mind is constantly disturbed by greed, anger, selfish interests, etc. A mind of absolute stillness is nirvana.

**empty of effort (wu-wei) 無為.** Free from contrived effort; free from clinging and attachments; unconditioned; absolute. Being wu-wei also means inner peace obtained by having no desires. Also translated as "unconditioned Dharma" where appropriate.

**four practices.** All other more "tangible" Buddhist practices are essentially one, or a combination, of the following four practices: accepting adversity, adapting to conditions, seeking nothing, and acting in accordance with the Dharma.

What is the practice of accepting adversity? When suffering, a practitioner of the Way should reflect: "For innumerable kalpas, I have pursued the trivial instead of the essential, drifted through all spheres of existence, created much animosity and hatred, maligned and harmed others endlessly. Even though now I have done no wrong, I am reaping the karmic consequences of past transgressions. It is something that neither the heavens nor other people can impose upon me. Therefore I should accept it willingly, without any resentment or objection." The sutra says, "Face hardships without distress." How? With thorough insight. With this understanding in mind, you are in accord with the Principle, advancing on the Way through the experience of adversity. This is called the practice of accepting adversity.

云何報冤行。謂修道行人，若受苦時，當自念言。我往昔無數劫中，棄本從末，流浪諸有，多起冤憎，違害無限。今雖無犯，是我宿殃，惡業果熟，非天非人所能見與，甘心甘受，都無冤訴。經云：逢苦不憂。何以故。識達故。此心生時，與理相應，體冤進道。故說言報冤行。

**kalpa.** A kalpa is a very long period of time. Formally, a *large kalpa* is a cycle of the universe, which consists of four stages: birth (of the universe or a "buddha world"), stability, disintegration, and void. The universe is then recreated (and destroyed), over and over again, by our collective karma. Innumerable kalpas refers to the countless cycles through lifetimes in the past.

**trivial/essential.** Without knowing the true nature of life and the "self," people are in endless pursuits that are ultimately of no consequences. We should consider what is meaningful in our life, and whether we are working on it or pursuing trivial matters instead.

**spheres of existence.** A sentient being can take rebirth in any one of the six spheres/planes of existence in the Triple Realm: as a deva (a celestial being), an asura (powerful like a deva but more aggressive and jealous), a human being, an animal, a hungry ghost, or a being in hell, all depending on one's karma (action or deeds).

**animosity ... harm.** Due to the ignorance of the Way, we intentionally or unintentionally caused much harm to others in this lifetime and each lifetime past. Applying the Principle of causality, we really have no grounds to feel resentment for the suffering we now face.

**karmic consequence.** Karma means action which includes physical, verbal, and mental activities. By the law of causality, each action has its corresponding consequences. Action that benefits others brings blessings and happiness; action that harms others brings suffering. We are subject to the consequences of our own karma.

**transgression.** An act against the natural law; an act that harms others.

**heavens (heavenly beings).** In Buddhism there are devas or celestial beings who reside in different levels of heavens. They are born with more powers and blessings than human beings due to superior deeds in their past.

**thorough insight.** People resent their fate because they lack understanding of causality and the teaching presented here. With the insight of "accepting adversity," one can face hardships without distress and turn suffering into spiritual progress.

Second is the practice of adapting to conditions. Sentient beings are without a self, being steered by karmic conditions. Suffering and joy are experienced together as a result of causes and conditions. Any reward, blessing or honor is a consequence of past causes; nothing remains when the necessary conditions are exhausted. So what is there to be joyful about? Knowing that success and failure depend on conditions, the mind remains unmoved by the wind of joy, experiencing neither gain nor loss. This is to be in harmony with the Way. Therefore it is called the practice of adapting to conditions.

二隨緣行者。眾生無我，並緣業所轉，苦樂齊受，皆從緣生。若得勝報榮譽等事，是我過去宿因所感，今方得之。緣盡還無，何喜之有。得失從緣，心無增減，喜風不動，冥順於道。是故說言隨緣行。

**adapting to conditions.** All things arise from certain causes and conditions, and will cease to exist when the conditions fall apart. This is the teaching of conditional arising, also called dependent origination. The enlightened and the wise understand and adapt to conditions, whereas the ignorant and foolish try to get results without the right conditions, or are unaware of the changing conditions, thereby bringing misery and disappointment onto themselves.

**without a self.** The "self" refers to an intrinsic, independent identity which we perceive in sentient beings and things. In a person, it is the false self or ego or "inner identity" that one takes for granted; in objects, it is the intrinsic value or character we associate with. This "self" is a delusion because it is dependent on changing conditions.

**suffering and joy.** Suffering is a result of harmful actions (karma), and joy is a result of beneficial actions. Most people experience a mixture of suffering and joy in their lives because they have created both good and bad karma in the past.

**reward/blessing/honor.** Result of good karma. Even though they are favored over suffering, they are also impermanent. To not realize this can lead to suffering.

**neither gain nor loss.** In practice, the mind is in equanimity, neither elated nor depressed. In principle, nothing is gained and nothing is lost.

Third, to seek nothing. Ordinary people, in their perpetual ignorance, crave and form attachments to everything, everywhere. This is called seeking. The wise are awakened to the Truth, and choose reason over convention; even though their forms follow the law of causality, their minds are at peace and empty of effort. Since all existence is empty, there is nothing to be desired. Blessing and Darkness always follow each other. This long sojourn in the Triple Realm is like living in a burning house; to have a body is to suffer, how can one attain peace? Those who understand this renounce all mundane existence, cease desires, and stop seeking. The sutra says, "To seek is to suffer, to seek nothing is bliss." It follows that to seek nothing is to truly follow the Way. This is the practice of seeking nothing.

三無所求行者。世人長迷，處處貪著，名之為求。智者悟真，理將俗反，安心無為，形隨運轉，萬有斯空，無所願樂。功德黑暗，常相隨逐，三界久居，猶如火宅，有身皆苦，誰得而安。了達此處，故捨諸有，止想無求。經曰：有求皆苦，無求即樂。判知無求，真為道行。故言無所求行。

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**attachments.** To crave or desire anything, to cling to or despise anything, to dwell in the past or grumble about the present are all examples of attachment.

**reason over convention.** Many common beliefs and practices are actually unwise, senseless, or even dangerous. Sometimes the truth is the opposite of what we believe. The wise can see what is real even if it means going against "conventional wisdom."

**their forms follow the law of causality.** Ignorant people do not realize that their bodies, actions and all phenomena follow the law of causality

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and try to go against it; therefore, they suffer. Wise people recognize this fact and accept it; therefore, they are at peace. The law of causality: in general consists of the following three principles: (1) Every phenomenon is produced by some corresponding cause and conditions. (2) Good deeds, actions that benefit others, will return blessings, and bad deeds, actions that harm others will return sufferings. (3) Good karma and bad karma do not necessarily cancel each other. Each will bear its own consequences.

**all existence is empty.** Because all existence is dependent on conditions, there is no intrinsic, independent identity or "self." The perceived qualities of objects or phenomena, whether desirable or undesirable, are conditional, relative, and impermanent; hence nothing is ultimately desirable.

**Blessing and Darkness.** The Maha-parinirvana Sutra tells of the story of a pair of deva sisters named Blessing and Darkness; wherever Blessing goes, good fortune follows; wherever Darkness goes, misfortune follows. However, the two sisters are inseparable, one cannot receive one sister without the other.

**Triple Realm.** (1) The Realm of Desire, where beings such as humans and animals reside. They possess physical forms and have varying degrees of desires for wealth, lust, fame, food, and sleep. (2) The Realm of Form, where beings who have attained the four dhyana (deep mental concentration) stages reside. They have finer, uni-gender physical forms but not the desires of the lower realm. (3) The Realm of Formlessness, where beings, through more refined meditation, are reborn without physical forms and exist in various subtle consciousness states only. Beings of the Triple Realm are still subject to karma and rebirth, and therefore have not attained liberation.

**long sojourn.** Cycling through countless rebirths, we have taken on all different forms of being and traveled through all of the Triple Realm. Without enlightenment, it is an endless journey without an ultimate purpose.

**burning house.** Each life in the Triple Realm has all kinds of suffering and ends in death, so the world we live in is like a house on fire that eventually consumes everything. Those who do not realize this still enjoy living in this house, instead of thinking of ways to get out!

**to have a body is to suffer.** Birth, aging, illness, and death are all afflictions of the body that are unavoidable as long as one has a physical body.

**mundane existence.** The six spheres of existence in the Triple Realm.

**stop seeking.** Seeking is defined here as the attachment to things and phenomena to gratify the selfish ego. When one understands the underlying empty nature of these things, one can have true peace of mind and stop seeking. However, we can, out of compassion, seek to enlighten and benefit others without attachment to the ego.

Fourth, to act in accordance with the Dharma. The principle of intrinsic purity is the Dharma. By this principle, all forms and characteristics are empty, without defilement and attachment, without self or others. The sutra says, "In the Dharma there are no sentient beings, because it is free of the impurities of sentient beings. In the Dharma there is no self, because it is free of the impurities of self." When the wise believe in and understand this principle, they should also act in accordance with the Dharma. There is no parsimony in the Dharma, so practice the giving of body, life, and possessions without any reservation. Understand and achieve "triple emptiness", with no reliance and no attachment. One liberates others without becoming attached to form, thus removing impurities. This benefits oneself, benefits others, and also glorifies the bodhi path. Dana is perfected this way; so are the other five paramitas. In order to relinquish delusions, one practices these six perfections, yet nothing is practiced. This is to act in accordance with the Dharma.

四稱法行者。性淨之理，目之為法。此理眾相斯空，無染無著，無此無彼。經曰：法無眾生，離眾生垢故；法無有我，離我垢故。智者若能信解此理，應當稱法而行。法體無慳，身命財行檀捨施，心無吝惜。脫解三空，不倚不著，但為去垢，稱化眾生而不取相。此為自行，復能利他，亦能莊嚴菩提之道。檀施既爾，餘五亦然。為除妄想，修行六度，而無所行。是為稱法行。

**act in accordance with the Dharma.** Finally, this practice of six perfections (*paramitas*) brings one's action and mind back to the ultimate, essential Principle described at the beginning.

**intrinsic purity.** All dharmas (lowercase *dharma* means any phenomenon) are neither good nor bad, beyond dualistic discrimination. Therefore it is called "intrinsic purity;" this purity is absolute, like the empty space, which can neither be contaminated nor cleansed.

**forms and characteristics 相.** The Chinese word 相 (*xiang*) means forms, marks, or appearances; it is extended to mean all perceived characteristics of any phenomenon.

**impurities of sentient beings and self.** Ordinary sentient beings have the deep-rooted delusion of an inherent, unchanging self, which develops into the ego and subsequently gives rise to greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and a host of false views; they then lead to the suffering of sentient beings. Being delusions, these false views and vexations have no real substance. Therefore, all dharmas are intrinsically "free from all impurities." To act with this understanding of no-self is to act in accordance with the Dharma.

**dana.** Charity. The first of the six *paramitas* (perfections) practiced by a bodhisattva. There are 3 types of generosity: giving of material, giving of solace (comfort, protection, removal of fear, etc.), and giving of Dharma.

**triple emptiness.** The highest form of *dana* is to give without the concept of the giver, the receiver, and the given, because all are empty. Then one can truly give without expectations, without the ego being involved. This is the perfection of *dana*, or *dana paramita*.

**six perfections 波羅蜜多.** *Paramitas*, the practice that can bring one to liberation. Literally, "to the other shore." To become a buddha, the bodhisattva practices the six *paramitas*: perfection of charity (*dana*), moral conduct (*śila*), tolerance (*ksanti*), diligence (*virya*), meditation (*dhyana*), and, most important of all, wisdom (*prajna*). The practice of the six *paramitas* can remove our impurities/delusions, which are originally empty, so in the end, nothing is gained and nothing is lost. Still, one then becomes a buddha; without the practice, the buddha nature is latent and one is an ordinary sentient being imbued with suffering.

**glorifies the bodhi path.** Bodhi is "awakening." To glorify the bodhi path (path to Buddhahood) refers to the Mahayana ideal of bringing countless beings to enlightenment along with one's own enlightenment.

## **THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS**

1. Suffering exists in everyone's life.
2. The causes of suffering are greed, anger, and ignorance.
3. Nirvana, the extinction of suffering, is possible for everyone.
4. Nirvana is achieved by following the Noble Eightfold Path.

### **四聖諦**

苦，集，滅，道。

## **THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH**

Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech,  
Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort,  
Right Mindfulness, and Right Samadhi.

### **八正道**

正見，正思惟，正語，正業，  
正命，正精進，正念，正定。

## FOUR TENETS OF CHUNG TAI

To our elders be respectful,  
To our juniors be kind,  
With all humanity be harmonious,  
In all endeavors be true.

### 中台四箴行

對上以敬，對下以慈，  
對人以和，對事以真。

## ACTION AND NON-ACTION

When in action, perfect all actions.  
When at rest, rest all thought.  
Action and non-action are both illusory;  
All we need in life are already present.

動則萬善圓彰  
靜則一念不生  
動靜原是虛妄  
日用一切現成

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## THREE REFUGES

### 三皈依

I take refuge in the Buddha, may all sentient beings  
Understand the Great Way profoundly,  
and bring forth the bodhi mind.

I take refuge in the Dharma, may all sentient beings  
Deeply enter the sutra treasury, and have wisdom vast as the sea.

I take refuge in the Sangha, may all sentient beings  
Form together a great assembly, one and all in harmony.

|      |      |      |      |
|------|------|------|------|
| 自皈依佛 | 當願眾生 | 體解大道 | 發無上心 |
| 自皈依法 | 當願眾生 | 深入經藏 | 智慧如海 |
| 自皈依僧 | 當願眾生 | 統理大眾 | 一切無礙 |
| 和南聖眾 |      |      |      |

## FOUR GREAT VOWS

### 四弘誓願

Countless are sentient beings, I vow to liberate;  
Endless are afflictions, I vow to eradicate;  
Measureless are the Dharmas, I vow to master;  
Supreme is the Buddha Way, I vow to attain.

|         |         |
|---------|---------|
| 眾生無邊誓願度 | 煩惱無盡誓願斷 |
| 法門無量誓願學 | 佛道無上誓願成 |

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## REPENTANCE

### 懺悔偈

All the harm I have ever done, since time immemorial,  
Are caused by greed, anger, and ignorance,  
And produced through my body, speech, and will,  
Now I confess and amend all.

往昔所造諸惡業 皆由無始貪瞋痴  
從身語意之所生 一切罪障皆懺悔

## DEDICATION OF MERITS

### 回向偈

May the merits of our deeds  
Reach every part of the world;  
Sentient beings large and small  
all attain enlightenment.  
Maha-Prajna-Paramita

願以此功德 普及於一切  
我等與眾生 皆共成佛道  
摩訶般若般羅蜜



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