A Six-word Maxim Regarding the Practice of Chan Design

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Introduction

What is Awakening Art? What is Chan Design? As we know, the significance of Buddha Dharma lies in leading all sentient beings to awaken from their delusions. In a certain sense, this wisdom itself is the art of awakening. In other words, Awakening Art refers to the creations crafted by artists under the inspiration of Buddhist wisdom, bearing their understanding and practice of the Dharma.

There are many kinds of art with myriad styles. If divided simply, art can be classified into traditional art and contemporary art. From my perspective, traditional art attaches more importance to artistic conception and expression of beauty. Contemporary art, on the other hand,

pursues authenticity and individuality.

Chinese traditional painting and calligraphy place particular emphasis on the "intention" or "idea." As the saying goes, "The idea is present before the first stroke of the brush, and when the last stroke is placed, the idea shines through." Moreover, "The quality of an artwork lies not in the technique but the idea conveyed." This "idea" refers to the profundity of perspective, including the creator's conceptions and intentions, the theme of the work, and the way of presentation. In these aspects, both the wisdom of emptiness expounded in the Buddha Dharma and the transcendence it conveys can bring a new vision and inspiration to artistic creators.

The contemporary artistic works focus on expressing the artists' exploration of human nature, the meaning of life, and the truth about the world and on posing questions with reflection. French artist Paul Gauguin's masterpiece *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* is a classic representative. The

reason that these three questions have resonated so deeply is that Gauguin confronts the eternal questions inherent in human life. As long as these problems remain unsolved, they will always be there, always troubling, and binding us in cyclic existence like floating weeds not knowing where to go.

Although artists are aware of these problems, without profound wisdom, it is impossible to understand human nature, find the meaning of life, and gain a thorough understanding of the truth about the world. Because they are not able to see clearly, they cannot find the way out of both art and life and eventually fall into nihilism. In fact, this is the dilemma faced by quite a number of artists. That is because the distinctive sensitivity of artists makes it easier for them to get caught up, doubt everything, suffer and struggle. So it's less about the artists posing questions, and more about them expressing their own confusion and helplessness through their works.

So, the question is how can we find our way out of this

predicament? Certainly, we cannot do this without the Buddha Dharma. The Buddha's wisdom not only guides us to see life as it truly is, but more importantly, provides us with the means to transform it. As for this matter, I have made it very clear in the lecture on the *Diamond Sutra* this morning. Now, I would like to talk about it from the perspective of artistic creation.

Artists devote a great deal of attention to their work. They view their works as the externalization of their thoughts, emotions, and artistic pursuits, and they rack their brains to strive for continuous innovation. However, many people have not realized that life is also a work that takes one's whole life and even many lifetimes to craft. Do we prefer this work to be a piece of an unconscious doodle full of mistakes or a meticulously designed and elaborately crafted masterpiece? I believe all people expect their work to be the latter, but how can we improve the quality of life and become a better version of ourselves? Undoubtedly, we cannot accomplish this without the wisdom of the Buddha Dharma. This is also why we are

going to explore "The Practice of Awakening Art and Chan Design" in this forum. Only by getting the subject of creation done right can we continuously provide materials for the creation of our works, just as farmers improve the soil so as to provide a constant supply of nutrients for the growth of crops.

So, what are the characteristics of Awakening Art and Chan Design? Concerning this question, I have proposed a six-word maxim: No-self, Formlessness, Infinity, Transcendence, Tranquility, and Detachment. Next, I will talk about my ideas regarding these points.

I

No-self

Speaking of the term "no-self," some may worry: Is this a denial of the existence of "I"? How should I posit myself? The most distinct characteristic of ordinary beings is their concern for the self. Beyond mere survival, their efforts are largely driven by the need for feelings of self-importance, superiority, and dominance. But how hard it is to pursue and maintain these three feelings! In terms of personal experience, people frequently get frustrated when these three feelings are not satisfied; in terms of interpersonal relationships, people fight over "who is the most important, who is superior, and who can be in charge." Let's think about it, from fame and wealth to

status, from family to career, aren't they all causing us afflictions, pains, and stresses once they are involved with these feelings?

After the Renaissance, the trend of Western humanist thought prevailed, advocating individual liberation and pursuing individual values. In modern times, the expression of individuality has reached its peak, and the ideology of "me-first" has become rampant. Yet people felt more and more at a loss. They could not find themselves. So, why do people get lost in the process of self-worship? This requires us to see clearly whether our pursuits can represent "I" or not.

Buddha Dharma tells us that human beings are born with two kinds of hindrances: one is cognitive obstacles, which prevent people from seeing themselves and the world clearly; the other one is afflictive obstacles, which are caused by wrong understanding. When we cannot see clearly, we instinctively grasp outward, taking all kinds of things that are not "I" as "I," thus causing ourselves

troubles. If we want to know ourselves and rediscover ourselves, we have to let go of our attachments. Therefore, no-self is not to deny the existence of the physical body but to deny our misunderstanding of ourselves and the world. Only by eliminating these parts that are not "I" can we eradicate all delusions, attain enlightenment, discard the false, and realize the truth.

How shall we gain a thorough understanding of no-self? In the practice of Chan Buddhism, it is by asking spiritual practitioners to contemplate the topics of inquiry like "Who am I?" and "What was my original face before my birth?" Among the objects that we perceive, does the name represent me, or does the body, mind, or identity represent me? Through analysis, we recognize and realize that all of these are corruptible and only have a temporary relationship with us. In the *Shurangama Sutra*, the nature of self is elucidated through "seeking the nature of mind in seven ways and discerning the emptiness in eight returnings." I will not go into the details here, but there is a crucial sentence at the end of the paragraph: "That

which can be returned to other sources is clearly not you; that which can be returned nowhere is none other than you."[1] It reveals to us that whatever can be deconstructed is only an illusion of being – a false self. Only the last state of existence, which is not deconstructible and neither arises nor ceases, is the true "original face."

We need to frequently ask ourselves: "Who am I? What ultimately represents me?" By asking and pondering repeatedly, eventually, we would realize that many of our seemingly reasonable pursuits are senseless; many of the things we desperately want to grasp are actually the wrong ones. Since these pursuits are senseless and we grasp the wrong things, we do not have to worry about gains and losses for these things or even spend our whole lives chasing them.

Many of our afflictions come from the expectations that

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1. *The Shurangama Sutra*, (CBETA, T19, no. 0945, p. 111, b9-10), translated by the Buddhist Text Translation Society, in *The Shurangama Sutra - Volume One: A Simple Explanation by the Venerable Master Hsuan Hua* (2002), 414.

our family will always be happy, our careers will be prosperous forever, and our bodies will stay youthful forever. In fact, all of these things are impermanent, and they only stay with us temporarily. Only by seeing the truth clearly can we not build up expectations and go through unnecessary sufferings. Therefore, no-self helps us not only know ourselves but also find ourselves.

In the practice of Chan design, no-self has three implications.

1. No-self can help us practice deep environmental protection.

The focus of Western Humanism is anthropocentrism, which holds that everything in the world serves people. Based on this ideology, human beings can do whatever it takes to gain benefits. This is the root cause of ecological destruction. However, the Buddha Dharma holds that human beings and the world are one and an integral whole. Direct and circumstantial rewards are not

separate. In addition, the Chinese idea of "the harmonious Oneness of Heaven and Humanity" and the Indian idea of "Unity between Brahman and the Self" are all about seeing human beings and the world holistically and having a sense of awe and gratitude towards nature. Fortunately, insightful people in the West have recognized this problem and put forward the idea of ecocentrism, which regards people as an important factor in the ecological environment, but not everything. However, without recognizing no-self, this transformation might merely be superficial, serving only to extend the use of all things for one's own benefit in a gentle and sustainable manner. In essence, it is still a plunder of nature rather than a peaceful coexistence with nature. Only by letting go of our attachment to "self," realizing the equality of all living beings, and understanding the mutual growth of all living things can the concept of ecocentrism be truly established. This awareness helps us design more environmentally friendly buildings and products that are in harmony with nature.

2. No-self can help us transform our design concept.

Many designers come up with works that are centered on their own benefits, but not for the sake of others. They want to highlight their sense of importance and superiority in their works, thereby flaunting their uniqueness and extraordinariness. Such works may be successful in a sense, but they also make the world varied and complicated today. People all want their voices to be heard, which ends up making a lot of noise. This needs some reconsideration in purposes and functions. For instance, in terms of architecture, a building is not only a commodity but also a place for living and working. Therefore, when designing a building, designers should take the ecological environment and customer needs into account so that the building can be eco-friendly and users can obtain a peaceful body and mind. A peaceful body is achieved through building a great spatial relationship. A composed mind is attained by creating a decent cultural atmosphere. Only by relinquishing from expressing ourselves and bearing an empathetic and altruistic mind can our works

be in harmony with numerous dependent arisings and our professional capability benefit the society.

3. No-self can strengthen our communication with all sides.

Many designers have trouble communicating with their clients. Why? Besides the differences in culture, aesthetic, and standpoint, the main reason lies in our self-attachment. Because we all live in our sense of self and we are all centered on our own experiences, positions, and interests, it is difficult for us to understand each other, thus causing communication barriers between each other. Understanding no-self is about getting us out of our feelings and learning how to listen and how to put ourselves in others' shoes. Only by truly understanding the needs and ideas of others based on respect, can we design with an altruistic mind while sensibly improving their artistic tastes. Thus we can communicate smoothly and bring ourselves more space for creation.

II

Formlessness

Design has form; it's impossible to design a building or a product that no one can see. Since everything has a form, why am I here talking about formlessness? In the lecture about the *Diamond Sutra*, I explained that the concept of emptiness in the Buddha Dharma does not negate the existence of any phenomenon but leads us to appreciate the world with the wisdom of dependent origination. All the existence, from design concepts to real objects, is made up of the designers' ideas plus various external conditions. Without these inward and outward conditions, can a work still exist?

Classical physics believes that there are indivisible fundamental physical elements and that these elements make up everything in the world, whereas modern quantum mechanics holds that the existence of fundamental elements is uncertain, which may appear as either particles or waves. What form it takes depends on how we perceive it. Therefore, all phenomena have no fixed quality – our perception determines the existence of the world.

This also tells us that every phenomenon is full of infinite possibilities. Our understandings and perceptions of many topics come with our habits, experiences, and preconceptions. Without these additional conditions, every finite present moment contains infinite possibilities. The concepts of emptiness and formlessness in Buddhism are to remove our presuppositions and attachments to the world and return things to their original appearances.

Our understandings of the phenomenon of existence have two effects on us. Correct understandings lead us to

truth and wisdom whereas wrong understandings lead us to afflictions and cyclic existence. What path to take? The key lies in how we look at it. People cling to what they see and believe it to be true, without acknowledging that what they see through colored glasses has been processed by themselves. The concept of emptiness in Buddhism is not to deny the existence of things, but to empty our false assumptions about the world. Only by understanding the concept of formlessness can we get rid of the fetters of finitude and realize emptiness and infinity in each finite present moment.

The guiding principles of the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* are "Non-thought is the tenet; Formless is the essence; Non-abiding is the fundamental." "Non-thought is the tenet" unveils to us the mind's void nature, free from the confines of thought. Our minds change unpredictably as clouds. Every thought is impermanent, and the mind dwells in appearances everywhere. However, behind the clouds, there is something as still as the void, which is beyond all forms.

The principle of "formless is the essence" tells us that the mind does not exist in any form. Chan School of Buddhism teaches spiritual practitioners to understand and recognize themselves by using the method of investigating in detail: We are busy all day long. Who is controlling all this? We frequently got caught up in emotions, sometimes bursting with joy, sometimes being overwhelmed with sorrow. Who is creating all this? We have been trying our best to eliminate pain and suffering. Yet we are still powerless when faced with our moody and crazy states of mind.

The biggest trouble with modern people is that they cannot calm their minds down. While they are doing one thing, they often think of another. They are controlled by smartphones, games, and desires to go shopping... even to the degree that they have lost their ability to rest. The problem is that many people do not know why they are like this. All these seem to be happening unconsciously.

How can we change that? First, we must learn how to observe our minds. In Buddhism, this kind of spiritual training includes Samatha (calm meditation) and Vipassana (insight meditation). Samatha aims to cultivate the mind's power of concentration by fixing the mind on an object of meditation such as the breath or an image of the Buddha so as to gradually stabilize the mind. Once the mind is able to abide peacefully, it will become so clear that the brightness of our intrinsic nature emits its effects, and it will realize the coming and going and the arising and ceasing of our delusive thoughts. The mind is like water. When the turbulence quiets down, it returns to its reflective state. The first sentence in the *Heart Sutra*, "Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, when practicing deeply the Prajna Paramita, perceives that all five skandhas are empty," illustrates the wisdom of such contemplation.

We have to take a close look at ourselves and examine where our minds are. Is the mind inside or outside the body? What is the mind like? What is inside of the mind? When the power of contemplation arises, we see the mind

is as shapeless and formless as the void, neither inside nor outside. As many Buddhist masters have perceived, "The mind is nowhere to be found." Although the mind is nowhere to be found, in the meanwhile, it knows perfectly well. The mind can see not only the Five Aggregates, the body and the mind, but also everything that fills the entire space and pervades all Dharma Realms. This formless, infinite, and omniscient essence of the mind is the very original appearance of our minds.

According to Buddhism, the world we see is closely related to our minds and the six channels of understanding the world. These six channels are respectively the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. They determine what kind of world we see. It is not the world that determines what kind of perceptions and understanding we form. Buddhism calls the world that our six sense organs face the Six Dusts (sensory fields), namely, sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and dharmas. The process by which the six sense organs contact with the Six Dusts generates six kinds of consciousnesses, namely, the eye consciousness,

the ear consciousness, the nose consciousness, the tongue consciousness, the body consciousness, and the mind consciousness.

These images would stay in our minds and become a kind of mental force that influences our understanding of the world. It is called "the shadows of coarse sense-data" in the *Shurangama Sutra*. To study Buddhism is to use our wisdom to examine these thoughts and emotions and empty them. Otherwise, we would fall into the cage of the mind and become a prisoner there, plagued by afflictions and negative emotions. When the mind returns to a state as vast as the void, then no thoughts can touch us, for the void is too vast to be bound or put into a cage. Only by realizing the formless essence of the mind can we become detached, unobstructed, and perfectly at ease.

In the practice of Chan design, emptiness and formlessness inspire us in three ways.

1. Formlessness can break the limiting preconceptions and attachments.

Over the years, we have received relevant educational and cultural lineages and developed our own experience and capabilities during work. These are our breadwinning assets, but they also set limits for us. Because once something is labeled as "mine," we would cling to our knowledge, experiences, and abilities and consider these particularly important, superior, and extraordinary. If we stop and stay there, we will be tied down by conventions and gradually lose our creativity. The wisdom of formlessness is not to empty our experiences and abilities, but to empty and eliminate self-attachment. When we possess a broad vision and an open mind, we will not be limited by our own habits and presuppositions in the creative process. We can further break these habits, preconceptions, and limitations in the industry and even cultural lineage. At present, there is a popular saying called "mind-blowing." In fact, formlessness is the ultimate imaginative richness, not sticking to one pattern, and not bound by any stereotypes.

2. Formlessness can help us break the binary opposition and build harmonious relationships.

For instance, in architectural design, it is necessary to establish a great relationship with people, architecture, and the environment. If we do not strike a balance among the three but instead show off and focus only on the presentation of the building itself, then harmony may be destroyed. Because architecture is not isolated but part of numerous dependent arisings, we need to view the relationship between the building, the environment, and the users. Modern businesses value ecological construction, and so does design. We should attach great importance to the ecology of the environment and society so as to establish a good interdependent relationship. The premise of doing so is to break our binary oppositional thinking. Through the realization of formlessness, eventually, we can integrate ourselves into nature, and forget both the outside and inside world.

3. Formlessness can break preexisting conceptions and unlock the infinity of life.

If life remains in a finite scope, then the inspiration generated is also limited. Only by realizing the void nature of the mind as thoughts occur can our creative inspirations flow continuously. Such a mind is unobstructed and can be of infinite wondrous uses.

III

Infinity

The world has two dimensions: finite and infinite. Most of the time, we live in a finite dimension, pursuing the Five Desires and the Six Dusts, seeking fame and fortune, while philosophy and religion explore the infinite dimension.

The finite dimension includes time and space. In terms of time, it is reflected in the fact that everything has a beginning and an end. For example, the lifespan of human beings is only several decades, and the life of all living beings has a beginning and an end. For those short-lived beings, from the cradle to the grave is but a day's

journey. For those long-lived beings, their lifespan may be millions of years. However, when compared with the time that the Earth has been around, their lifespans are too insignificant to mention. However, even the existence of the Earth, the Solar System, and the Milky Way galaxy, along with any astronomically long durations, are merely fleeting processes within the vast expanse of the infinite.

Where were we from before birth, and where are we going after death? What kind of existence is there outside the scope of a finite life? What are those great unknowns? If life is not infinite but merely a fragment from birth to death, then it is worthless even if we can live for billions of years. Although the existence of the present has its value, if you look back at the end of the universe, can this value compete with the annihilation that is destined to come? Certainly, we cannot live peacefully without exploring the infinity of life and without finding the answers.

In terms of space, human existence is also insignificant. In the vast universe, the Milky Way is insignificant; in the Milky Way, the Solar System is insignificant; in the Solar System, the Earth is insignificant. Not even to mention, a person is only one of more than seven billion people on Earth. Contemplating spacetime which is tens of thousands of billions of light-years can make us go crazy. If the universe is so big and we are as small as ants, what exactly is the meaning of our lives?

Nevertheless, Buddha Dharma tells us that the essence of the mind is that of the universe. In addition to the finite dimension of life, there is an infinite dimension. Without such an answer, I think many people would not know how to position themselves. Therefore, the questioning of infinity not only broadens our horizons but also allows us to find the meaning of life.

How can we understand the infinite mind? We live in the city. At home, we face daily necessities and life pressures. When away from home, we face an incessant stream of

vehicles and a cluster of high-rise buildings and large mansions. Even the sky above us has been cut by tall buildings and obscured by haze. In such an environment, our minds are easily closed. The size of our vision determines that of our minds. The vision we are talking about here includes that of the environment and knowledge. As the ancients said, "read ten thousand books, travel ten thousand miles." When our vision is broadened, so are our minds and lives. What is more important is the realization of truth attained through spiritual practice, which is incomparable to any knowledge in the world.

In Buddhism, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is hailed as "Great Conduct." In his ten vows, each practice is built on infinite perceptual objects. The objects of each of his vows include "all Buddhas and World Honored Ones, as numerous as fine motes in all Buddha lands in the ten directions and the three periods of time, to the exhaustion of the Dharma Realm and void," along with innumerable sentient beings. The void is infinite, and so are the Bodhisattva's great vows and virtuous deeds. The infinity

in Buddhism is also reflected by the infinite space and time. The ten directions represent space – east, west, south, north, southeast, northeast, southwest, northwest, and up and down; the three periods of time represent time – past, present, and future. Zhuangzi's depiction of "the four directions, heaven, and earth are called 'Yu,' whereas the infinite time since ancient times is named as 'Zhou'" also illustrates the universe in terms of space and time.

No matter what we do, we must take infinite space and time as the object. Only by establishing such a vision can our minds and actions correspond to those of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. The mind is as vast as the void, but because of self-attachment and the limitations of our cognition, our view of the world has become so narrow that we only care about one person, one family, one enterprise, or one region. At most, we care about our nation, our country, and the world. However, even the world that we hold in our minds is insignificant in the universe.

How should we get to know and understand infinity?

Buddha Dharma provides us with two types of spiritual practice. The first is to take the infinite space and time as well as all sentient beings as perceptual objects. Such practice of contemplation helps us not only remove the inner narrow presumptions but also return the mind to its original state. The second is to examine the mind with the power of careful observation and contemplation, to go beyond the finite, and to know infinity directly. So, the concept of infinity in Buddhism is not an armchair theory, but something that can be achieved through meditative concentration.

In the practice of Chan design, infinity inspires us in two ways.

1. By understanding infinity, we can open up our minds and recognize the beauty of emptiness.

The mind and external conditions actually affect each other, and especially, for ordinary beings, it is easy for our minds to change with the circumstances. When

we only see what is in front of us, our minds would have plenty of things to express. Such expression shown in the design often appears exaggerated, complicated, and blindly overloaded with many irrelevant fancy elements. In such an environment, our minds would be uptight, crowded, and narrow. Practice of Chan design mostly uses subtraction, using simple and clean space to help us appreciate the connotation of emptiness, and then guides us from the emptiness of external circumstances to that of the mind.

2. We should unify the finite and the infinite.

Although the work itself is finite, if our minds are only limited to this, then our work will become an isolated existence. Only by eliminating the preexisting settings and boundaries within us can our minds and works extend outwards. In terms of architecture, the ancients in China were adept at incorporating the surrounding landscape, treating buildings as part of the overall environment. This approach allows one to experience an infinite world

within a limited space, while also reflecting the ingenuity of creation within the boundless view. The fusion of the finite and the infinite enables seeing the grand from the minute, merging the interior with the exterior, offering significant inspiration for innovative design thinking.

IV

Transcendence

Speaking of Buddhism, transcendental practice and worldly living are two unavoidable topics. Chinese Confucianism is traditionally quite worldly. Though certainly it also contains some transcendental contents, as represented by hermit culture. However, this is the kind of renunciation that comes from a lack of better options. As the saying goes, "In a righteous nation, one should serve; in a corrupt nation, one should retreat." People choose to settle for less because their ambitions are unfulfilled. However, the path of transcendence and liberation in Buddhism is not only a conscious choice after a thorough understanding of the truth about life, but also an active

renunciation of the joys of samsara. We are engaged in worldly living out of compassion not only because we are unwilling to relinquish all sentient beings, but also because we have committed ourselves to liberating all living beings from the abyss of suffering. In practice, we must deal with worldly affairs with a transcendental mind. It is an elevation of transcendence, not a deviation. As a result, the spiritual temperament of transcendental practice and that of worldly living are destined to be totally different.

Confucian concerns are mainly confined to the current society, while Buddhist spiritual practice is based on the ten directions and three periods of time. Through hearing, contemplation, and practice, it guides people to establish the right view, examine the world closely with the wisdom of emptiness, realize the impermanence and illusion of the Five Aggregates, the body and the mind, to recognize the false nature of fame, gain and loss, glory, splendor, and wealth, and to comprehend the truth that "all conditioned phenomena are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows, dew, and lightning." With such

understanding, on the one hand, we can actively engage in worldly living with bodhicitta, transforming the world and enlightening ordinary beings; on the other hand, we can realize that everything we do is nothing but the moon in the water or an illusory flower, and thereby we would no longer fall into attachments to "I" and to worldly affairs. In this way, no matter how much we do, we would neither calculate "how much we have done," nor feel "how great I am," or be burdened by these thoughts. By combining transcendence and renunciation, we maintain a detached mind of transcendence while being actively engaged in worldly living.

In the practice of Chan design, transcendence provides us with two inspirations.

1. Worldly design is akin to addition; blindly chasing external forms will lead to inevitable deviation.

For instance, many designers take kitsch as down-to-earth, take weirdness as creativity, and take luxury as elegance,

magnificence, and top class. These designs not only fail to provide people with the enjoyment of beauty but also mislead the public aesthetic preferences. Transcendental design is much like doing subtraction. Under the premise of satisfying all necessary functions, this kind of design work is presented in a concise, simple, and low-key style, not only making us feel content with fewer desires but also urging us to focus on the inside instead of chasing the outside. In the present noisy, impetuous, and materialistic society, we especially need this breath of fresh air.

2. Worldly design is to meet self-needs; it will foster desires and worldly attachment.

Modern society is constantly agitating our desires. Fulfilling them brings satisfaction but is also exhausting. Therefore, more and more people gradually relinquish their material pleasures, begin to pursue the kind of life that reverts to original simplicity, pursue the quality and meaning of life, and pursue a life flavored with Chan, so that the mind that has always been galloping outwards

can get some rest. As designers, only by focusing on the inner nature of life can we create works that settle people's bodies and minds. Such design works neither cater to the public's taste nor follow conventions but possess the power to transcend and purify the mundane world so as to meet our higher level of spiritual needs.

V

Tranquility

Tranquility represents the spiritual attainment and inner peace conveyed by one's work. Most people's understandings of tranquility tend to be external. People think tranquility refers to a quiet environment without noise. However, tranquility in Buddhism mainly refers to inner peace. In Buddhism, the word often associated with tranquility is nirvana, and nirvana itself is perfect tranquility.

What is nirvana? Nirvana refers to the cessation of inner restlessness. Our minds are full of various kinds of delusions, emotions, and afflictions, arising here and falling

there like roaring waves. Especially living in the internet age, we are constantly bombarded with and controlled by overwhelming information. Even when we want to sleep, we still habitually play with our phones. Even when we yearn for a moment of peace, we cannot help but indulge in delusive thoughts. Once we lose the ability to rest, our bodies and minds will lose the opportunity to recharge. Therefore, not only is our fatigue hard to dissolve, our restlessness is also hard to ease.

How can we calm the mind? The Buddhist practice of precepts, meditative concentration, and wisdom is a set of well-organized and effective methods that have been proven countless times over two thousand years. By observing the precepts and not committing unwholesome karma, we can lead a simple and healthy life, and avoid the interference of bad external circumstances. Through cultivating the power of meditative concentration and dwelling the mind in one place, not only our minds would tend to settle but also our afflictions would have no opportunity to arise. By observing and examining our mind and body

as well as the external world, eventually, we would open the door to wisdom and realize and attain the true reality. When our delusive thoughts subside, we would experience the inner tranquility and joy of life.

In the practice of Chan design, tranquility inspires us in two ways.

1. We have to take a close look at what our work conveys.

When people admire the calligraphy works of Master Hongyi and other eminent monks, they can sense the power of tranquility; conversely, when people look at some contemporary works, they might feel agitated. In fact, in Chinese calligraphy and painting circles, whether a work contains "internal heat" has long been regarded as one of the important criteria to evaluate the quality of a work. The so-called "internal heat" actually refers to restlessness, a kind of externalization of the designers' state of mind. The thoughts that designers use in the process

of creation would all be expressed through the works.

All works of art have a lot to do with the mental states of the designers themselves. In a sense, a work is actually another kind of existence of its creator, a projection of the creator's spiritual temperament. As the saying goes, "One's calligraphy reflects one's personality." From the perspective of quantum mechanics, all phenomena do not exist objectively. The world we see is determined by our own karmic systems and cognitive patterns. What we perceive and see contains both the energy of the world and our cognitive patterns. So, when observing the world, we are not just observers; we are also participants. An observer even plays such a role, not to mention a creator. Artists are supposed to create spiritual nourishment for the public, but if we create with an impetuous and utilitarian mind, our works will certainly convey a feeling of impatience and eagerness for instant success. If we do that, then our behaviors would be no different than producing junk food. This is something that we particularly need to reflect on.

2. To convey the power of tranquility through Chan design, we must first cultivate a Chan mind that understands no-self, formlessness, and infinity.

We frequently talk about empowerment. In a sense, not only do the Three Jewels possess empowerment, but the works of art can also convey empowerment, which is a kind of spiritual power that induces resonance in us. Do we bring positive or negative empowerment to the public? Does our work bring tranquility or agitation to the public? To a large extent, these depend on the creators. Only by improving our self-cultivation can we provide a healthy artistic product to society.

VI

Detachment

Being detached from all worldly affairs and watching the clouds rising at ease is what many people yearn for, but it is not something we can do just by thinking about it. Without letting go of our inner attachments, afflictions, and pressures, it would be beyond our power to achieve detachment. But, how can we attain a detached mind? Western society emphasizes the liberation of one's personality, mainly to remove the shackles of institutions, beliefs, and traditions. Liberation in Buddhism allows us to remove the shackles formed by false perceptions and attachments and thereby eradicate our inner confusion and afflictions. Otherwise, even if we have all kinds of external freedom,

we would still be like silkworms trapping ourselves in cocoons. Therefore, detachment must be premised on wisdom. Only when we see the truth about the world can we let go of all our attachments, neither taking pleasure in material goods nor expressing pity for ourselves, and truly attain the ease of watching the rising clouds.

In another respect, many designers and artists may hit a bottleneck in the stage of creation. Those who have achieved certain accomplishments will be anxious when facing these obstacles which are difficult to overcome. The more anxious they get, the harder it is to break through the bottleneck. Nonetheless, the question is how can we make a breakthrough? Besides improving our skills, we also need to attain a detached mentality. The so-called detachment, for one thing, is to abandon the stereotypes, emancipate the mind, and "go into battle without any burdens," and for another, is to get out of our comfort zone and explore more possibilities. More importantly, we should not be bound by fame and wealth. If all we care about is fame and gain, then our behaviors no longer

correspond to art. However, these are the interpretations of detachment in the conventional sense. The ultimate detachment is to exceed the cycles of rebirths and transcend samsara.

In the practice of Chan design, detachment not only reveals the temperament of a work but also reflects the spiritual attainment of a designer. Detachment has two inspirations for us.

1. Do not design for self-promotion; otherwise detachment becomes unattainable.

If designers and artists value themselves too much, then they only want to show off and highlight their uniqueness. Such behavior is itself an expression of craving, hatred, and ignorance, inevitably leading to considerable distress. In fact, this is the sore point for many artists. The veneer of art can sometimes provide a guise of concealment and apparent justification for such craving, hatred, and ignorance. Nonetheless, no matter what form the

three poisons take, their essence is still affliction, and they are the sources of our suffering.

2. In design, do not pander to public taste or conform to convention; otherwise detachment becomes unattainable.

Undoubtedly, it is not that we only entertain ourselves without considering the needs of the public, but retain our detachment in this worldly living so that we can create works in a natural and unrestrained way – neither increasing nor decreasing and leaning neither to the left nor the right. Whether it's design or artistic creation, both are meant to serve all sentient beings. However, such creation must come from life and rise above life, following the conventions of the mundane world yet transcending them. Only by doing so can we be neither disturbed nor distracted by craving, hatred, and ignorance and create truly nourishing spiritual wealth for society.

Above is my interpretation of "No-self, Formlessness,

Infinity, Transcendence, Tranquility, and Detachment." This six-word maxim is not only a guide for the practice of Chan design but also an even higher realm of life. As the saying goes, "Efforts are made beyond the painting." What are these efforts? They usually refer to a comprehensive cultural accomplishment, but from my perspective, these efforts should include both the designer's and artist's reflections on the meaning of life and perceptions of the truth about the world. Without these two, the so-called cultural attainments are superficial, only staying at the level of knowledge and techniques.

When we resolve to attain awakening and are willing to practice the six-word maxim in the design process, such artistic creation will not be limited to "art" or "technique," but it will become a vessel to convey the Way. Therefore, Chan design should not only involve thinking from professional and stylistic perspectives to inspire creativity, but it is even more crucial to learn Buddhist wisdom to attain a higher realm of life.

Creating excellent work of life and becoming the best version of ourselves is what really counts.