THE THIRD TURNING OF THE WHEEL

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Wisdom of the
Samdhinirmocana Sutra

REB ANDERSON

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Praise for *The Third Turning of the Wheel*

Tenshin Reb Anderson has long been one of the foremost Western Buddhist teachers in elucidating for a modern audience the subtleties and practical relevance of Indian Buddhist psychological teachings and insights. Through a clear description of the valuable but so far underappreciated *Samdhinirmocana Sutra,* as well as reflections of its teachings in Zen lore, this book delivers a wonderful detailed but playful expression of the profound depths of spiritual reality and how these teachings relate to our own lives. This luminous, comprehensive guidebook to the workings of consciousness and compassionate awakening mind will provide great benefit for meditators and students of Buddhist thought. Close study of this material will help liberate the reader from many common, ingrained misunderstandings to more fully express their practice and lives.

—Taigen Dan Leighton, author of
Zen Questions: Zazen, Dogen, and the Spirit of Creative Inquiry

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THE THIRD TURNING *of the* WHEEL

WISDOM *of the* SAMDHINIRMOCANA SUTRA

Reb Anderson

Shambhala · Boulder · 2012

Shambhala Publications, Inc.
4720 Walnut Street
Boulder, Colorado 80301
www.shambhala.com

ISBN 978-1-930485-79-2
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Anderson, Reb.
The third turning of the wheel : wisdom of the
Samdhinirmocana sutra / Reb Anderson. — First edition.
pages cm
Includes index.
ISBN 978-1-930485-79-2
1. Tripitaka. Sutrapitaka. Samdhinirmocanasutra—Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Title.
BQ2097.A53 2012
294.3'823—dc23
2012002821

Project Editor: James William Coleman
Editors: Holly Hammond, Donald Moyer
Production Editor: Linda Cogozzo
Indexer: Ty Koontz
Cover and Text Design: Gopa & Ted2, Inc.
Cover Calligraphy: Kazuaki Tanahashi
Author Photograph: Barbara Wenger
Lithographer: Walsworth Print Group
Text set in Weiss

To the Ancestors

Homage to our great compassionate teacher, Shakyamuni Buddha, source of the true dharma for the last 2,500 years.

Homage to his enlightened disciples who realized, cared for, and transmitted the dharma as he transmitted it to them.

Homage to the boundless ocean of bodhisattvas who received the teachings of the Great Vehicle, and remained in the world to care for and convey it to all living beings.

Homage to the *Arya-samdhinirmocan-nama-mahayana-sutra,* the Great Vehicle scripture revealing the profound intimacy.

Homage to the bodhisattva brothers, Asanga and Vasubandhu, who devoutly studied, practiced, and realized the teachings of the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra,* and then expressed their compassion and understanding in writings that have inspired innumerable beings to study this deep and difficult dharma.

Homage to the scholars of buddha dharma, east and west, who have brilliantly and thoroughly translated the sublime and subtle *Samdhinirmocana Sutra,* and the careful and penetrating treatises that flow from this sutra.

Homage to Shogaku Shunryu Daiosho, who encourages us to go beyond any limited views of Zen practice and to explore and embrace the whole ocean of buddha dharma.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK EMERGES from the devoted study, contemplation, and discussion of many people over several decades. I did not write this book on my own. Like *Being Upright,* it would never have come into being without the immense interest, effort, persistence, and thoroughness of many people. Chronologically it comes from forty years of study of texts based on or derived from the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra,* and then from reading, reciting, and discussing the sutra itself for the past fifteen years.

I offer this background in part to acknowledge that the views and the understandings expressed in this book are based not only on the sutra itself, but also on the works of ancient teachers who were inspired by the sutra and then interpreted and developed its teachings.

I began studying the Pali Abhidhamma in 1968, after coming to San Francisco to practice with the Zen Center community and its founder, Suzuki Shunryu Roshi. I learned that these systematic scholastic studies based on the Buddha's early teachings were of great value in understanding the Buddha's wisdom, but finding the material too dry, I gave up without much effort.

Then, in the autumn of 1971, as Suzuki Roshi was dying, he advised his students to study with the noted translator and scholar of the Prajnaparamita Sutras (Perfect Wisdom Scriptures), Edward Conze, who was then a visiting scholar and teacher at the University of California, Berkeley. Upon meeting Professor Conze, I felt encouraged to return to Abhidharma studies, which I resumed after Suzuki Roshi's death in December of that year.

During 1973, I was kindly given permission to attend a series of classes on Vasubandhu's *Vimsatika Karika (The Twenty Verses on Mind-Only)* taught by another well-respected visiting scholar of Buddhism, Yuichi Kajiyama. After those classes, I wanted to study another major work by Vasubandhu called *Abhidharmakosa*, and I obtained a manuscript version of an English translation by Dr. Leo Pruden, based on the wonderful French translation by Louis de La Vallée Poussin. So for many years, I was able to study and give classes on the *Abhidharmakosa,* consulting with a number of Sanskrit and Buddhist scholars, especially Professor P. S. Jaini, to help in correctly understanding and interpreting this work.

I then went on to study the *Trimsika Karika* (*The Thirty Verses on Mind-Only*), also directly inspired by the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* and attributed to Vasubandhu, with many priests and lay students for several years.

Throughout all these studies, I kept hearing how seminal the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* was for *The Thirty Verses, The Twenty Verses,* and in general for what is called the Yogacara school of Mahayana Buddhism. At the time, there was no English translation of the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra.* The original Sanskrit was lost, and the sutra survived only in Tibetan and Chinese translations.

Finally in 1995, through the kindness of Rev. Gil Fronsdal, I received a copy of John Powers's new translation of the Tibetan version, which I immediately began to study. Then in the same year, wonderfully for me after waiting so long, a translation of a Chinese version by Thomas Cleary appeared, and in 2000, another translation from the Chinese by John Keenan. With the aid of these three translations, I studied the text line by line with various groups of priests and lay students. This intimate study led me to give talks on these sublime teachings throughout the United States and in Canada, England, Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland.

Many of the study sessions and dharma talks were kindly and carefully recorded by more people than I can thank specifically here. After these talks were recorded, they were transcribed. The principal transcribers were Rev. Shoho Kuebast and Kando Rachel Diefenbacher, and Rev. Kokyo Henkel also did transcription work. We owe them an immense debt of gratitude for their deep devotion to this work.

Then Professor James Coleman, who had heard these talks and participated in these discussions, suggested compiling these talks into a book. He further enthusiastically offered to serve as editor for this book, which he has done with great skill and understanding, with tremendous patience and thoroughness. He has done this in addition to his full-time academic teaching and family responsibilities and his own Buddhist studies and meditation practice. To him I express my deep and heartfelt gratitude.

The next step in this process was to read through and edit the various chapters of the manuscript in the midst of group discussion. One group was composed of priests in training and senior priests. We went through various chapters and carefully discussed and edited them. These priests are Abbess Eijun Linda Ruth Cutts, Arlene Lueck, Bryan Clark, Shoho Kuebast, Carolyn Cavanagh, Catherine Gammon, Charlie Pokorny, Connie Cummings, Jane Lazar, Jeremy Levie, Jiryu Mark Rutschman-Byler, Koji Dreher, Kokyo Henkel, Meg Levie, Reirin Gumbel, Shokuchi Deirdre

Carrigan, Gyokuden Steph Wenderski, Susan O'Connell, Thiemo Blank, Valorie Beer, and Yuki Kobiyama.

A second group of senior priests did the same thing with mostly different chapters of the manuscript. The members of the Senior Seminar are Abbess Eijun Linda Ruth Cutts, Arlene Leuck, Christina Lehnherr, Taiyo Lipscomb, Ninen Carrie Kutchins, Furyu Schroeder, Kokyo Henkel, Meiya Wender, and Anbo Stuart Kutchins.

To all these dharma friends who have worked on the text, I give my wholehearted thanks. I am amazed at their enthusiasm and energy for studying the teachings of this sutra, and grateful for their kindness in supporting my efforts in dharma practice.

The last two chapters of this book correspond to the last two chapters of the sutra. However there were no transcribed talks on the final chapters of the sutra at the time that Professor Coleman originally worked on the manuscript. Although I had already given many talks on these chapters, I gave a new set of talks for the sake of inclusion in this book. I wish to sincerely thank Karen Mueller, one of those who heard these talks, for graciously transcribing them.

These final transcriptions were edited by Rev. Catherine Gammon. She then shared her editorial work with James Coleman. I reviewed the results of their dialogue and gave them my feedback. Going back and forth, the three of us worked together in the formation of the last two chapters of the book. To Rev. Gammon I offer my most sincere appreciation for performing this thorough and truly loving service for the sake of the dharma.

I also thank my wonderful assistants, the reverends Roberta Werdinger, Jane Lazar, Catherine Gammon, Connie Cummings, Gyokuden Steph Wenderski, and Shokuchi Deirdre Carrigan, who have all given very kindly and carefully in innumerable ways to this project.

Finally, I would like to thank the publishers, Donald Moyer and Linda Cogozzo, for their encouragement, aesthetic sensibility, editorial acuity, knowledge of the readers' needs, and grace in shepherding the entire publishing process. My appreciation and gratitude for their assistance and support is truly great.

This work has been blessed by great kindness, known and unknown.

FOREWORD

THIS BOOK is the product of an American Zen master's encounter with an ancient Indian sutra of amazing depth and subtlety. Although I know some scholars will be tempted to argue about whether its interpretation of this great sutra is "accurate" or not, that really misses the point. This is living dharma, as much a product of the twenty-first-century world as of ancient India. Its goal is nothing less than to ignite the flame of liberation in its readers, and that is the standard by which it deserves to be judged. So I invite you to surrender yourself to these teachings and see what happens.

Many classic Buddhists texts are now fairly widely read in the West, but few Westerners, or for that matter few Asians, have ever heard of the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra,* much less tried to read it. Its tongue-twisting Sanskrit title lends itself to many different translations including "The Sutra that Explains the Profound Secret," "Explanation of Mysteries," and "Sutra Explaining the Thought."[1] Its goal is to resolve the apparent contradiction between the teachings the Buddha originally gave and the later Prajna Paramita teachings that became so important with the growth of Mahayana Buddhism. The sutra pursues that goal with a logical, systematic presentation that covers everything from the nature of the ultimate to the structure of human consciousness, the characteristics of phenomena, the path of meditation, and the qualities of a buddha.

The *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* was probably composed in India around the second century of the common era and reached its final form in the third. It was originally in Sanskrit, but that text has been completely lost (although some of us dream that there might be one last copy in a cave in Asia, waiting to be discovered). Beyond that, not much is really known about its origins, but there are a couple of plausible theories. One holds that the text was based on oral teachings given by the historical Buddha that were excluded from the original Buddhist canon. This may seem far-fetched, considering the fact that the sutra wasn't written down until seven or eight centuries after the Buddha's death. But remember that all the Buddha's teachings were memorized and passed along from generation to generation of monks, and that the earliest Buddhist canon wasn't recorded until about three centuries after his death. So it is not unreasonable to believe that other teachings may have survived even longer in oral form. Another plausible theory holds that this sutra was written down by monks or yogis with virtuoso powers of concentration who went into deep meditative states,

visualizing the Buddha and then asking him questions. This is the explanation I favor, since to this day it is still common for practitioners to visualize the Buddha and ask for his guidance. Moreover, most of the chapters in the sutra are organized around a series of questions put to the Buddha by different bodhisattvas, and each might well represent the contribution of a different yogi.

Etienne Lamotte's careful analysis of the linguistic similarities and differences among the different chapters of the text led him to conclude that the final version of the sutra was probably a compilation from several different sources.[2] He argues that it was originally in three independent parts. The first part dealing with the nature of the ultimate adheres most closely to the Prajna Paramita tradition and is probably the oldest. The middle three chapters are a later composition, and they contain many of the sutra's most original ideas, including those about the subconscious mind and the three natures of phenomena. The last three chapters are, according to Lamotte, another separate unit. It is here in chapter 8 (of the Tibetan version) that we first find the idea that all phenomena are "mind only," which became the foundation for the "idealistic" school of Buddhist philosophy.

Although the Sanskrit original has been lost, one translation into Tibetan and five in Chinese survive. There also are four translations from those sources into Western languages. The first was Lamotte's translation from Tibetan into French in the 1930s.[3] Two English translations came out in 1995 and another one in 2000. John Powers's translation entitled *Wisdom of Buddha*[4] is from the Tibetan, and the other two, one by Thomas Cleary entitled *Buddhist Yoga*[5] and one by John P. Keenan entitled *The Scripture on the Explication of Underlying Meaning*,[6] come from Chinese sources. In his original lectures, Anderson Roshi relied most heavily on the Powers translation, and all quotations from the sutra for which no specific source is given are from that translation, with page numbers indicated in parentheses.

All the key passages from the sutra analyzed by Anderson Roshi are included in this book, and it will stand alone without a reading of the full sutra. I would, however, highly recommend that anyone interested in delving further into this great sutra look at all three translations. The *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* is a difficult and demanding text, and I have found that passages that are obscure in one translation are often much clearer in another.

I would like to offer my deepest gratitude to all the many people from the Zen Center community who worked on the transcriptions or read over parts of the manuscript and offered their suggestions and comments. In addition, I would like to thank Claudia Coleman, Rosemary Donnell, Mick Malotte, Michael Moran, Judi Martindale, and Sylvia Alcorn for all their support and assistance, and most especially Tenshin Reb Anderson for his generosity, intellectual brilliance, and deep compassion. May the merit of this work benefit all beings.

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2011

chapter one

THE THREE TURNINGS OF THE WHEEL OF DHARMA

A BUDDHA is someone who sees the way things really are. When we see the way things really are, we see that we're all in this together, that we are all interdependent. A great surpassing love arises from that wisdom, and that love leads buddha to wish that all beings would open to this wisdom and be free of the misery that arises from ignoring the way things are. Buddhas appear in the world because they want us to have buddha's wisdom, so that we will love every single being completely and protect every single being without exception and without limit—just as all the buddhas do.

The *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* shows us how buddha sought to fulfill this wonderful desire, how he tries to bring us all to enlightenment. The scripture tells us that the Buddhist tradition has three phases, or as it is usually put, that there are three turnings of the wheel of dharma. What many believe to be the first scripture recording Shakyamuni Buddha's actual words is called the *Dharmachakra Parvartana,* or "Setting the Wheel of the Dharma in Motion." There were two more turnings of the wheel, and the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* speaks of both of them.

Buddha taught in different ways for different audiences, and the threads of the teachings sometimes got entangled with each other because they weren't laid out systematically. People sometimes got confused about what the teaching was. So this sutra attempts to straighten them out.

The First Turning

When the historical buddha appeared in the world, there was something about him in his enlightened condition that made people ask him to teach them. People would ask him, "What's going on with you? Why do you look so serene and joyful?" So the Buddha, with his intention to liberate all beings, interacted with people who had their own intentions and perspectives, and when they interacted, various things came up. He had to speak in a language that the people listening to him could understand, so in this first turning of the dharma wheel he offered a conceptual, logical teaching. He showed us how to analyze our experience, and he set out a path for people to find freedom and liberate themselves from suffering.

The goal of this analysis was to show us that our life experience is fleeting, impermanent, and unstable. But the Buddha didn't usually just tell people that our life is fleeting, unstable, and impermanent. He usually

emphasized a way of looking at experience so that the fleeting, unstable quality of life would be discovered. And he taught this analysis so that we would see not only that our experience is fleeting, but also that there is no receptacle, or container, or supervisor, or controller, or possessor, or pilot in addition to the fleeting elements shown by the analysis.

This process of analysis also looks at the different moral qualities of our experience to see whether our behavior is tainted or pure. Tainted means different things to different people, but the question is simply: Is our activity, our living right now, oriented toward gain and loss? We look to see whether our activity is oriented toward gain and loss or is free of concern for gain and loss. This analysis of the moral dimension also reveals that the concern for gain and loss is based on the idea of self, but there is actually no independent self in this field of experience. If I see that what I'm doing is concerned with gain, I will discover that I think there is a controller, a supervisor, a possessor, a container of the multiplicity of elements of my experience. And because I think that, I'm concerned with gain and loss for that controller, for that owner, for that independent self, and that makes me suffer.

The more we analyze our experience, the more we see this idea of an independent self that arises with concern for gain and loss, and the more we come to see that such a self cannot be detected in actual experience. There is the idea of a controller, but the controller cannot be found. There is the idea of a container of our experience, but the container cannot be found. There is an idea of an owner of our experience, but no owner can be found. "Owner" goes with concern for gain and loss and turmoil and suffering. "No owner" goes with no concern for gain and loss and with true freedom. This is what the early teachings of the Buddha were about.

We can also look at what helps us pay attention to what's going on, and this too helps disabuse us of the idea of independent existence. This analysis purifies the mindstream. It helps us see more and more clearly the absence of anything permanent or independent. This first turning of the wheel was addressed to the person looking at self: someone looking at her own experience, purifying herself through moral analysis and through the analysis of empirical experience, and becoming personally liberated in that process. The first turning was personal and conceptual, and it produced an individual liberation.

As things came up in his interaction with people, the Buddha was happy to teach individual people this logical conceptual path to personal liberation. It was a path that helped people become free of suffering and live in the world as a pure experiential event. It helped them drop the belief that they were separate from other beings, or for that matter, that they had any independent existence at all. The first turning of the wheel was for the purpose of individual liberation, and the Buddha was quite successful. Many people who listened to this teaching, understood this teaching, practiced this teaching, became purified of their false beliefs, and won personal liberation.

You could say the Buddha was a revolutionary, but you could also say he was a great flowering of the Indian religious tradition. One Sanskrit scholar told me that if you look at all the words the Buddha used in his teachings, you find that almost none of them were new. Wherever he was, he used the language of the culture. The only new word the Buddha used that wasn't just common Indian religious language was *bodhisattva*—that one word. Otherwise he was using the words of the culture. He shared a lot with other yogis. You can see he had great yogic powers, but others had yogic powers too. He could see where people were coming from and where they were going, but other yogis could too. But his interpretation of this process of change—particularly in terms of his understanding of the self—was a little bit different from everyone else's. As far as we know, nothing like it had been seen before. And the way it was taught after his death became even more subtle still. People in India during Buddha's time weren't ready to hear all the implications of his doctrine of no self. Later, after the Buddhist community had taken deep root, we have the second turning of the wheel, which presents even more profound and more subtle teachings on selflessness.

Avalokitesvara, speaking in behalf of the Buddha in the *Heart of Perfect Wisdom Sutra* said that "all dharmas are marked by emptiness" (*sarva-dharmah sunyata-lakasana*).[1] All dharmas, all phenomena, are empty. But in the second turning of the wheel, this teaching on emptiness is vastly expanded. A hidden implication of this and all the Buddha's other teachings is that, like all things, the teaching itself is an interdependent phenomenon. He's giving it to you because you're the one he's talking to, but ultimately there's no reality in what he's saying. It is just something that comes up between you like a dance. And because it's interdependently arising, it has

no ultimate existential status. But he didn't explicitly say that at first. People might have said, "Well then, why should we listen to you?" Or they might have said, "Why should we practice the moral precepts, if they have no ultimate, existential status?"

The Buddha had to establish a strong ethical foundation for his students before he could encourage them to meditate on the selflessness of all phenomena; and many people did attain personal liberation with such ethically grounded meditation. But until practitioners are deeply grounded ethically, buddhas do not bring up the more subtle wisdom teachings that might undermine the ethical foundation of the community of practitioners.

In the Buddha's first scripture, he begins with the wisdom teachings of the Middle Way and the four noble truths and not with teachings on ethical commitment and discipline.[2] I believe the reason he could do this for his first students was that they were already very well grounded in ethical discipline, and they had realized deep concentration practices based on that ethical ground. Upon this foundation, it was appropriate for the Buddha to offer them wisdom teachings.

Over the millennia, Buddhism has become very strong in terms of ethical discipline and the monastic systems to uphold it, but the danger of losing sight of our ethical foundations remains. As we get into more and more subtle realms of truth, and realize that morality is empty of inherent existence, we might not be able to uphold the commitment and rigors of moral discipline unless that realization is mature. And if we can't continue to be wholeheartedly devoted to ethical discipline while we go into the study of the profound emptiness of things, then we should stop opening to the ultimate truth of emptiness.

The Second Turning

When the Buddha passed into complete *nirvana,* the community was strong, and there were many enlightened disciples. But the Buddhist community had to become still more mature before it could withstand the impact of the second turning. It took about five hundred years before that next turning occurred. The historical buddha was no longer alive, and so the next turning of the wheel had to use a different buddha. A cosmic buddha was going to have to turn the wheel. And the cosmic buddha did not emphasize that what is happening is impermanent, fleeting, bouncing, dancing elements, as in the first turning, but taught that these elements have no independent existence. The second turning offers no conceptual

approach to reality. It refutes the previous method and the previous path based on a conceptual approach to liberation. In the *Heart Sutra,* the great cosmic bodhisattva Avalokitesvara tells us that form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness are all empty, and in emptiness there is no suffering, no cause of suffering, no end of suffering, and no path to freedom from suffering. In other words, none of the Buddha's conceptual teachings, such as the four noble truths and the eightfold path, really apply.

In the first turning of the wheel, things were interdependent and real. In the second turning, they're ultimately empty and unreal because they're interdependent. So there is no logical approach to practice, no approach to liberation, no path to freedom. Because all things are interdependent, including freedom, freedom itself is not real. Suffering is interdependent, and therefore suffering is not ultimately real. In this second turning of the wheel, bondage, turmoil, and misery are interdependent phenomena and therefore not real. Liberation and peace and joy are interdependent and therefore not real. Thus liberation and bondage have the same nature.

This kind of teaching creates problems for some people. But any problems that come up have the nature of being completely free of any problems. The way that things are is right before us, right now, and using any approach to them is a distraction.

Another big difference from the first turning of the wheel is that this pathless path is not about personal liberation. The path where we see that complete freedom and complete bondage have the same nature is not the path of individual liberation; it's the path of liberating all beings. It's not the path of the individual buddha, or the historical buddha, it's the path of the buddha that is the same as the entire universe. The entire universe, in the second turning of the wheel, is always showing us the truth, no matter what's happening. There is no conceptual approach to the entire universe. It just immediately presents itself all the time. And because there's no conceptual approach, there's no difference in access for those who have received instructions about the path and those who haven't. Those who haven't had instructions have no path to drop. Those who have had instructions have a path to drop. The Buddhists and the non-Buddhists are on the same level with this truth. The non-Buddhists don't have to give up Buddhism, the Buddhists do. The non-Buddhists, however, have to give up whatever they've got, because we have to meet what's happening directly

with no words, with no concepts. This is the path of universal liberation. This is the second turning.

The Third Turning

The next path, the third turning of the wheel, which is talked about in this scripture, resurrects the conceptual approach. It offers us a logical path, just like the first one. But this logical path is based on the refutation of the logical path. It's based on the second path, which says, if you take the slightest step toward the truth, you move away from it. If you use any means to realize what you are, you alienate yourself. That's the second path. The second path is actually the truest in a way. But unfortunately it seems to refute all the teachings of buddha prior to that, and many people found those teachings very, very useful. So the third path redeems the logical approach to practice, but it is a logical approach that is based on the refutation of logic.

The first turning of the wheel constructed a path of liberation, the second turning refutes the path, and the third turning accepts the refutation of the path and redeems the path. This scripture offers a path based on the refutation of the earlier path but redeems the earlier path. Another way to say it is that the first turning gives the logic of liberation, the second condemns all logic, and the third reconstructs logic but based on the understanding that logic is ultimately completely useless. In fact, the third phase used logic more than ever before, and it could use logic more energetically because it was based on the emptiness of logic.

In this sutra, the bodhisattvas ask the buddha: "You taught this way, the first turning way, and then you taught the second turning way. When you were teaching the second turning, what was your intention?" Then the buddha explains his intention and that there are these three turnings. The first turning is an analytical, conceptual approach, teaching the five aggregates, the eighteen *dhatus,* the four noble truths, the twelve links of dependent origination, and so on. All these different kinds of teachings aimed to help people see phenomena in such a way that they would be relieved of the belief in the independent existence of the self. Then in the second turning, the buddha taught that everything, including the teachings, lacks inherent existence, is unproduced, unceasing, and naturally in a state of nirvana. After he gave those teachings, the bodhisattvas said: "That sounds very different from the early teaching. What did you have in mind?" So he tells us what he really had in mind in both cases, which then becomes

part of the third turning teaching, which is a deeper revelation of the nature of ultimate truth.

The third turning protects us from a dangerously narrow understanding of the second turning. It's possible that some understandings of the second turning would deprecate the first turning. But a subtle understanding of the second turning enhances the first turning, so that the first turning then can be taught in a more subtle and a more selfless way than it could be taught the first time. When the Buddha Shakyamuni first taught, he allowed the illusion that there was something to get from his dharma. In order to reach some people, he needed to make the teachings look like they really existed. In the second turning, he shows that all the teachings and all the methods only have apparent existence. In the third turning, we find a presentation of the first turning that is in accord with the second turning. So in this scripture, we are offered a systematic path and a conceptual approach that are free of self.

After we realize the ultimate, we see whether we can come back into the conventional, conceptual presentation of the teaching in such a way that we don't violate the understanding of the ultimate truth. We spiral round and round and round until all beings have a correct understanding of the teachings. The wish to do this is called *bodhicitta*—the way-seeking mind—and the realization of the ability to do that is the fruition of bodhicitta.

There is a Zen saying that goes: "When I first was practicing the Way, there were mountains and rivers. After I practiced for thirty years, I understood there are no mountains and no rivers. Now, finally, there are mountains and rivers again." But these mountains and rivers walk and talk. These mountains and rivers leap through the sky and boogie in the basement. These mountains and rivers are the fully realized mountains and rivers, because these mountains and rivers are based on the understanding that finally there aren't any mountains and rivers. We can't really understand that there are no mountains and rivers until we understand mountains and rivers. We can't really understand mountains and rivers until we understand that there are no mountains and rivers.

So we need these three turnings of the wheel. We need the conceptual approach. We need to enter into an immediacy of our life that gives up the conceptual approach. And then we need a conceptual approach to test that we really have given up the conceptual approach. We need a Zen Center with an address, a door, a telephone number, an e-mail address, and a

website, with buildings and gardens and robes and hats and people, and especially vegetarian feasts. We need all that, and we need the teachings of the tradition, but then we need to refute the whole thing and have people at the door saying, "This is not a Zen Center. There's no Zen Center here." Otherwise, it's not really a Zen Center. And then, just to test to see if we really understand that there isn't any Zen Center, we take care of the Zen Center. But as we take care of it, we ask ourselves: "Are we taking care of it with the understanding that in ultimate truth there is no Zen?"

Of course, sometimes we notice that the way we're taking care of Zen Center looks like we think there really is a Zen Center, and there's not much sign that we realize that there's no Zen Center. There doesn't seem to be an understanding that this interdependent thing called a Zen Center can never be found precisely because it's interdependent. So then we confess, "We don't understand Zen here at Zen Center," and that sounds pretty good. But then we also think: "We do understand Zen at Zen Center, and we're confident about that because our understanding is based on 'we do not understand Zen at Zen Center.'" And we're kind of happy about that because we understand that it's not just us—nobody understands what Zen is. But we may be the ones who are happy about not understanding.

The teaching of the three turnings of the wheel is a conceptual offering to help us understand a nonconceptual approach to liberation, or I should say, to understand no approach to buddhahood, no approach to freedom. It is a conceptual approach to understand no conceptual approach—a conceptual approach to immediacy. And the immediacy is not at all disturbed by being involved in a conceptual approach, because in every moment of being involved in a conceptual approach we are immediately intimate with the ultimate truth of the conceptual approach: namely, that it's not real.

If we don't have a conceptual approach, that's fine, although it's very rare. The main thing is that, as we're involved in our conceptual approach to whatever we're doing, we don't miss the immediate, nonconceptual reality that we can never be separated from. Then we can enjoy ultimate truth no matter what's happening. But this enjoyment is not for yourself. The nonconceptual approach is for the liberation of all beings. The conceptual approach, although it can be quite good, is for the conceiver, and the conceiver doesn't exist.

We aspire to be buddha's offspring, and so we are like larva bodhisattvas, but the larvae need a skin. And what's the skin? The skin is buddha's

conceptual approach. We wrap that little larva in a nice silken conceptual package with neat little analytic, conceptual techniques, and we cook in this cocoon until we shed the conceptual techniques and just be butterflies. And now that we're butterflies, we can teach other larvae about how to put a skin around themselves in a more selfless way, because we're liberated from our conceptual approaches.

When we first come to the practice, in some sense we're like little larvae, since we haven't found our own inner truth yet. So we wrap ourselves in the buddha's teaching of the first turning. And we grow in that, and then we drop that, and then we just directly be ourselves, our butterfly selves. Then we lay the eggs of the teaching so there can be another generation.

This is the cycle of the wheel. It's the first turning, the second turning, the third turning, the first turning, the second turning, the third turning, and so on. We need to keep cycling our conceptual activity with the immediacy of reality and then test the immediacy of reality by reentering the world of conception, the world of words. Then we drop the words, drop the signs, drop the characteristics, drop the conceptions and enter into the world of immediate freedom. Then we test it by re-entering the world of the manipulation of concepts, and round and round we go.

Prepare the Ground

Before we plunge into the teachings of this sutra, into this third turning of the wheel of dharma, I would urge you to prepare the ground, the ground in your heart, to receive these teachings. How can you do that? Suzuki Roshi said that *zazen* (sitting meditation) is the key that opens all the great teachings. If you go to these teachings with a zazen heart, they open for you. In other words, our practice, particularly our sitting practice, prepares us to receive these teachings and let them enter our life. Suzuki Roshi also said that zazen is a tenderizer. I know from my experience that if we sit still and quiet with other people for a while, we all become more and more tender.

When I check people's sitting postures at the beginning of a long retreat, I often find that their backs seem to be hard and resistant to touch. Their backs seem to say: "Don't touch me! Leave me alone!" or "I can't adjust, I gotta stay in this position, otherwise I won't be able to survive." I feel a kind of toughness at the beginning of the sittings. But after several days, I can feel the bodies of the meditators have become tender. It's kind of like: "Okay, okay. Thank you for your suggestion."

In the book *Being Upright,* I wrote about a friend of mine who was ordained as a Zen priest and then he started using cocaine. He stopped practicing, took off his robes, and became a drug dealer. I watched him. I watched his skin turn to leather. I could see him getting harder and harder, more and more protected from the suffering of this world. He even started wearing a leather jacket. The jacket was a symbol of what happened to his heart. It had been tanned and hardened by using and dealing cocaine. And he was selling other people things to harden themselves to this world, too. People in this world of suffering like to put on leather sometimes for some protection from the pain. But this sutra demands that we do just the opposite, that we approach life and the teachings with a tender, open heart.

I find that even if I am not ready, these Great Vehicle teachings for the bodhisattvas help me get in touch with my resistance and my toughness. Sometimes they seemed to ask me: "Are you trying to get anything out of this scripture? Because if you are, we'll give you some stuff, but it probably won't be what you're looking for. And why do you want to keep reading if you're not going to get what you want?" When they gave me some stuff I wasn't looking for, that I didn't find interesting or informative, I just thought, This is boring. Boredom is a form of resistance to what's happening. But I wouldn't push against my resistance and force myself to continue. I would honor my resistance and put the book down. But I had a kind of intention to come back later. Sometimes when I came back, I'd read for a while and then close the book again, and sometimes I'd just open the sutra and close it. But finally the time came when I wasn't resisting anymore. I had become tender. I was ready, and the sutra took me away and I took the sutra away. We went away together.

chapter two

THUS HAVE I HEARD

THIS SUTRA BEGINS with a wondrous image of a buddha sitting in a palace full of brilliant gems emitting great rays of light that illuminate all the worlds in all the limitless universes. This palace is perfect in its proportions, infinite, and boundless. It arises from supreme virtue that transcends all worlds, from the pure consciousness of one who has perfect mastery. It is a natural emanation of a buddha.

When I first encountered these kinds of images, I had trouble appreciating them. I thought, "This is too exaggerated. This could never really happen. Somebody is trying to trick me into believing in the impossible." This kind of resistance is a natural part of the process of opening to the inconceivable dharma of the Great Vehicle. If we continue to be devoted to these inconceivable teachings and open to these images, we will realize them as living metaphors of perfect enlightened wisdom.

This great palace is the domain of the *tathagata,* the enlightened one. Innumerable bodhisattvas—great beneficent, compassionate, wise beings—are gathered there like clouds. But the community gathered around a buddha includes far more than just these great beings. There are innumerable divine beings, the *devas.* There are the *nagas,* snake-like beings who live in the realm of the water, and *the yakshas,* powerful beings, sometimes beneficent, sometimes malignant, who live in the earth and the air and the lower realms. There are *gandharvas,* celestial musicians who live in the air and play music for us when we're in celestial moods. *Gandharva* means "fragrance-eater." They are called that because they live on fragrances.

The *asuras,* sometimes called fighting demons, or Titans, are in the assembly. They are in competition with the gods and wage constant war with the divine beings out of envy for their bliss. The asuras reject the root virtues of ethics and concentration and instead, motivated by envy, try to attain bliss by personal power. This is exemplified by powerful people throughout history, such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, who aspired to the bliss of divine beings.

Next come the *mahoragas,* big-bellied demons shaped like boa constrictors, who are lords of the soil. They are something like Jabba the Hutt in the early *Star Wars* pictures, huge and fat, or the sandworms in

Dune that were the size of locomotives. There are also *kimnaras,* who are like centaurs, half man and half horse.

Finally, the sutra says, there are humans and nonhumans. "Nonhumans," generally speaking, refers to ghosts. What are ghosts? I would suggest to you that ghosts are beings that dependently co-arise when there's an experience that we don't fully live. It doesn't happen every single time, but when something powerful takes place, and we don't fully experience it, that can be the condition for the arising of a ghost of the experience. If you do a period of meditation, for example, and you don't practice wholeheartedly, it gives rise to a kind of ghostly specter of an unlived period of meditation. In that sense, we are haunted by history, the history of the moments we haven't fully lived. A buddha's assembly welcomes all these ghosts who represent all our unfulfilled experience, our unfulfilled life. They are welcomed to come and receive the dharma so they can be fulfilled and released.

The point of all this is that the community around a buddha is vast. Innumerable types of beings live in the air and in the earth that surround a buddha, and buddha welcomes them all: the wise and the foolish, the kind and the cruel, the weak and the powerful, the gods and the ghosts.

The Characteristics of a Buddha

The sutra goes on to describe the characteristics of a buddha in some detail. Among other things, a buddha is "steadfast due to great bliss and joy in the taste of the Dharma; enduring in order to bring about the welfare of all sentient beings." (6) Do you want to join buddha in tasting the dharma? The bliss of dharma sustains us to be steadfast. The buddhas are enduring, enduring, enduring, in order to bring about the welfare of sentient beings. Enduring the world of suffering. Enduring the pain that the buddha feels for our pain. Because the buddha loves us, she endures that pain happily. The buddhas live only for the welfare and happiness of all sentient beings and endure all difficulties in order to do so.

"The Bhagavan was endowed with a mind of good understanding and did not possess the two [negative] behaviors." (7) There are ten traditional epithets for buddhas; one of them is *bhagavan.* It means a person worthy of great respect. Such persons have destroyed all illusion and are free of all defilements. They are steadfast in the bliss and the joy of tasting the truth, the dharma, the teaching, the law of the universe. The two negative behaviors the sutra refers to are the afflictive obstructions and the

obstructions to the attainment of omniscience. The buddha has eliminated them both.

The sutra says that the bhagavan is “perfectly absorbed in the teaching of signlessness.” (7) What is signlessness? It’s the way that the signs of a thing do not reach the thing. The way we’re built is that we can’t experience something without a sign. You meet somebody and your mind immediately makes a sign of them, and then you apprehend the sign in order to perceive them. You make things into objects so that you can be a subject. You can’t be a subject without objects. So you make the universe into an infinite array of objects. And in that process your mind puts signs on things so that you can get a hold on them. This is our normal process of perception, and in order to do it, we have to distort the world a little bit. And the world is actually asking us to do that so it can have a relationship with us. Everybody is asking you to do that to them so that they can have a relationship with you. You put a sign on them so you can get ahold of them and bring them into your consciousness, and this is called perception.

Once we can do that, we have to understand how these signs are not the person that we’ve made into an object. So once we’re engaged with these signs, we have to give them up. If we’re engaged to be married, we have to give up our fiancée, because holding on to the sign we put on our fiancée distorts the relationship. Holding on to the sign, we think that the sign is the person, but people are not objects. People are actually inconceivable and ungraspable. But inconceivable and ungraspable people are kind of useless to us, so we make them into objects by “signing” them. Then we can engage with them. But to know them in this perceptual way involves a distortion, and we need to start working to relate to them as buddhas do. That’s why the sutra is telling us about the buddhas, so we can learn how to be absorbed in the teaching of signlessness.

The sutra tells us that the bhagavan is “abiding in the way that a Buddha abides.” (7) How does one abide the way a buddha abides? A buddha abides by not abiding. The abode of the buddha is no abode. It’s good to have no abode. And if you can abide by not having any abiding, you’re abiding like a buddha. That will help you to be absorbed in the teaching of signlessness, and the teaching of signlessness will help you to abide the way a buddha abides. Because buddhas are absorbed in the teaching of signlessness and do not abide, they can really help others. But this is a difficult thing for us, because our tendency is not to abide in signlessness

but to be absorbed in signs. I say "tendency," but it's a pretty strong tendency. It's the way things almost always are. And it's suffering. But even though abiding in signs is suffering and affliction, we still resist the teaching of signlessness because it's unfamiliar. We wonder, "What will happen to us without signs? I'd rather not find out—I might turn into Jabba the Hutt. Who knows what will happen if we actually open to the teaching of signlessness that allows us to abide the way a buddha abides?"

A buddha is "endowed with an unimaginable embodiment, having fully given rise to the wisdom of all the Bodhisattvas, endowed with the non-dual abiding of a buddha and the supreme perfections, he had reached the limit of the uniquely liberating and exalted wisdom of a Tathagata." (7) The buddhas are embodied. They have bodies, but their bodies are unimaginable. We have bodies, but our bodies are imaginable. Of course, the way our bodies really are is unimaginable. But the way we have come to be born as sentient beings is by imagination, and those bodies are imaginable. Buddhas are not born by imagination. Buddhas have imaginations if they need to use them, but they are not born of imagination. They are born of compassion.

The Assembly of Sravakas and Bodhisattvas

The scripture tells us that in the assembly there were measureless, innumerable *sravakas. Sravaka* literally means "listener" or "hearer." So these are beings who listen to the teaching of buddhas and practice it, and when they become wise they become a kind of saint known as an *arhat.* So in the assembly of this scripture, there were measureless numbers of these listeners who were all very knowledgeable children of the buddhas, with liberated wisdom and completely pure ethics. Although they were not bodhisattvas, they were very learned, intent on good contemplations, speaking good words, and doing good deeds. "They had agile wisdom, quick wisdom, sharp wisdom, the wisdom of renunciation, the wisdom of certain realization, great wisdom, extensive wisdom, profound wisdom, wisdom without equal. Endowed with the precious jewel of wisdom, they possessed the three knowledges and had obtained supremely blissful abiding in this life and great purity. They had fully developed a completely peaceful way of acting, were endowed with great patience and determination, and were wholly engaged in the Tathagata's teaching." (9)

"Also in attendance were innumerable Bodhisattvas who assembled from various Buddha lands, all of them fully engaged and abiding in the great

state [of the Mahayana]. They had renounced cyclic existence through the teaching of the Great Vehicle, were even-minded toward all beings, and were free from all imputations, ideations, and mental constructions. They had conquered all demons and opponents and were removed from all the mental tendencies of the Sravakas and Pratyekabuddhas." (9) The *pratyekabuddhas* are private or solitary buddhas who remain in seclusion and do not teach others. So the bodhisattvas mentioned in this sutra are removed from all the mental tendencies of these great, wise saints and solitary buddhas. Bodhisattvas may not always be as wise as these saints, but they live by vows these saints have not taken. They vow to serve the welfare of all beings in lifetime after lifetime and to attain supreme unsurpassed enlightenment.

These bodhisattvas "were steadfast through great bliss and joy in the taste of the Dharma. They had completely transcended the five great fears and had progressed solely to the irreversible stages. They had actualized those stages which bring to rest all harms to all sentient beings." (9)

The five fears are fear of loss of life, fear of losing control of your mind, fear of loss of reputation, fear of loss of livelihood, and fear of speaking in front of a large assembly. These five fears are overcome by the bodhisattvas because they practice giving. They practice giving wholeheartedly; therefore they don't ever lose anything. They give away everything they have before they can lose it. They give away their livelihood, their mind, their reputation, and their life. They can't lose them because they are constantly giving them away. Therefore they are not afraid. They receive the gift of giving from the buddhas, and they practice it and become fearless. They receive fearlessness from the buddhas, and they give it to sentient beings. They also give the dharma to sentient beings, if they want it —if they're tender enough and ready to receive it.

As the scripture puts it, the sravakas "happily associated with those who yearn for the teaching," (9) and this applies to bodhisattvas too. This sutra doesn't say so, but I deeply believe that bodhisattvas do not closely associate with those who do not yearn for the teaching. For bodhisattvas, close association means to teach the dharma. In chapter 14 of the *Lotus Sutra,* after talking about the comfortable, happy, blissful practices of the bodhisattvas, there is a discussion of what are called the realms of intimacy or the realms of familiarity of bodhisattvas. It also tells us all the different kinds of beings that bodhisattvas are not intimate with, that is to say, beings

who do not yearn for the teaching. But it says that if these beings ever want the teaching, then bodhisattvas wholeheartedly offer it to them. So it's not that bodhisattvas do not associate at all with people who are not interested in the teaching, but they don't really get close because these people do not want what bodhisattvas have to give: the teachings.

Of course, you can help people who do not want the teachings in some ways. But to really receive what bodhisattvas have to offer, you really have to want it, really thirst for it, really yearn for it. Those are the people bodhisattvas and sravakas are intimate with. It would actually be a disservice to those who do not want the teachings to let them get close to the bodhisattvas and then reject their teaching. That would be very harmful for them, because the act of rejection would contribute to the development of further karmic obstructions to receiving the teaching, such as resistance, embarrassment, and pride. Buddhas and bodhisattvas wait calmly and patiently until beings sincerely request the true dharma before they respond by offering their teachings. The bodhisattvas must be invited to give the teachings before they get close to people.

This chapter ends with a list of some of the bodhisattvas who were in attendance at this great gathering. "Among them were the Bodhisattvas, the Mahasattvas, Gambhirarthasamdhinirmocana and Vidhivatpariprcchaka, Dharmodgata, Suvisuddhamati, Visalamati and Gunakara, Paramarthasamudgata and Aryavalokitesvara, Maitreya and Manjusri, all abiding together." (11) Much of the rest of the sutra is a record of the questions these great bodhisattvas put to the bhagavan, the buddha of this sutra, and the responses he gave.

chapter three

THE NATURE OF THE ULTIMATE

THE FIRST QUESTIONS in the sutra are not put to the buddha himself but to a bodhisattva, Gambhirarthasamdhinirmocana, the bodhisattva with the same name as the sutra. *Samdhinirmocana* means "unlocking or revealing the intent," and *ghambhirartha* denotes the deep meaning. So this is a good bodhisattva to have at the beginning of the sutra, because he is the bodhisattva "revealing the profound meaning of the intent of the buddhas." The questioner is Vidhivatpariprcchaka bodhisattva, whose name means "logical reasoning." Thus, logical reasoning is questioning the one who reveals the profound intent of the buddha.

The Questions of Vidhivatpariprcchaka

"At that time, Bodhisattva Vidhivatpariprcchaka questioned the Bodhisattva Gambhirarthasamdhinirmocana about the ultimate whose character is inexpressible and non-dual." (11) This chapter, then, is about the ultimate. What is the ultimate? It's called *paramartha. Param* means "ultimate." *Artha* is "meaning" or "object." The ultimate, the final meaning, is what is being questioned here. "O Son of the Conqueror, when it is said, 'All phenomena are non-dual, all phenomena are non-dual,' how is it that all phenomena are non-dual?" (11)

In nonduality, subject is not separate from object. Nonduality may be misinterpreted to mean that there is no subject and object. But it isn't that there is subject and object or that there isn't subject and object. It's just that they are not separate. A subject is something that has an object. You can't have a subject floating around without an object. And you don't have objects floating around without subjects. Subjects make objects; objects make subjects. They are born together. They dependently co-arise. They are nondual in the sense that they are not different things. They are part of the same reality. But we subjects imagine that the objects of our perception exist independently. For example, the book you are now reading may seem to exist on its own. This kind of misunderstanding of reality is the source of all the afflictions that this sutra is intended to relieve. This chapter does not directly tell us what nonduality is, yet it beautifully demonstrates the nonduality of all phenomena. It further teaches us that the character of the ultimate is inexpressible, and this inexpressibility is intimately related to the nonduality. Like nonduality, the inexpressibility of the ultimate will be addressed even though it wasn't asked about.

The great bodhisattva responds to Vidhivatpariprcchaka's question, "Son of good lineage, with respect to all phenomena, 'all phenomena' are of just two kinds: compounded and uncompounded." (11) Or you could say created and uncreated, or made and unmade. This is probably from the Sanskrit words *samskrita* and *asamskrita,* which are sometimes translated as "conditioned" and "unconditioned."

Right away, we get this turning that is characteristic of the logic of this sutra. After Gambhirarthasamdhinirmocana tells us there are two kinds of phenomena, compounded and uncompounded, he says, "The compounded is not compounded, nor is it uncompounded." (11) The created is not created nor is it uncreated. And then he drops the other shoe, "The uncompounded is not uncompounded; nor is it compounded." (11) Most of us understand that the compounded is not the uncompounded and that the uncompounded is not the compounded. The wonderful surprise here is that the uncompounded is not the uncompounded and the compounded is not the compounded.

This kind of logic leaves a lot of people pretty confused, so Logical Questioner immediately asks the bodhisattva: "Oh son of the Conqueror, why is the compounded neither compounded nor uncompounded? Why is the uncompounded neither uncompounded nor compounded?" (11) And the great bodhisattva answers: "Son of good lineage, 'compounded' is a term designated by the Teacher. This term designated by the Teacher is a conventional expression arisen from mental construction. Because a conventional expression arisen from mental construction is a conventional expression of various mental constructions, it is not established. Therefore, it is [said to be] not compounded." (11–13)

If something is not established, it means that no matter what you do, you can't get ahold of it. You can't pin it down, find it, or grasp it, but you can talk about it. So Gambhirarthasamdhinirmocana tells us that the "compounded" is a conventional designation given by the tathagata. It comprises mental constructions or mental fabrications. And these mental fabrications arise from various other mental fabrications. It is all built on nothing. It is a total fabrication. Therefore the compounded that the buddha has offered cannot be established. In other words, the compounded is not actually real, and since it does not really exist, it has not been created. The logic here is that since A is not established and is not actually real, A is not A. Logical Questioner learns that the reason A is not A is that A is a

conventional designation depending on mental constructions that are just composed and built on other mental constructions and therefore are ultimately unreal.

"Son of good lineage, 'uncompounded' is also included within the conventional." In other words, this same argument applies to the uncompounded. Then there's another sentence that is very nice: "Even if something were expressed that is not included within the compounded or uncompounded it would be just the same as this." (13) In other words, it would follow the same pattern. If you could think of something else that wasn't included here, it would still be a conventional designation that depends on mental construction, which is based on various other mental constructions, and it also could not be established. It wouldn't be itself. Nor would it be something else.

So when the buddha gives us an expression, it is built on mental construction and cannot be established. Therefore the expression is not the expression, nor, by the same principle, is it something else. This demonstrates the logic of the inexpressibility of the ultimate.

Now we come to another crucial turn in the teaching. The inexpressibility of the ultimate does not mean that an expression is not "without thingness," or as Thomas Cleary translates it, "that there is nothing being discussed."[1] We have all these things, and we start to discuss them. But these things can't be established; therefore these things are not things. Because this discussion leads to the fact that the things we talk about are not the things, or that A is not A, does not mean that we're not talking about something. Although every expression is about something that is beyond itself, it is about something. In other words, there is something there beyond our thoughts and speech, and our words and expressions don't reach it. But we still have to use expressions to guide people to the reality of the thing.

What is that thing? "It is that to which the Aryas completely and perfectly awaken without explanation, through their exalted wisdom and exalted vision." (15) These *aryas,* or noble ones, have completely and perfectly realized that very reality, that very thing that is inexpressible. The translations from the Chinese explicitly state a beautiful point that is only implied in the Tibetan. Cleary's translation says: "What is that thing? Sages, with their knowledge and vision, detach from name and words, and therefore actualize enlightenment." That they "actualize enlightenment" in this context means they actualize this thing that is beyond name and words.

“Then, because they wish to make others aware of this nature that is beyond words, they temporarily set up names and characteristics and call something uncreated.”[2] The translation from the Tibetan doesn’t mention that the reason these sages set these things up is to help others realize what they’ve realized. Of course, it’s implied, but it’s helpful that the Chinese directly points out the wonderful fact that those who have realization make conventional designations, such as “all phenomena are of two kinds, compounded and uncompounded,” in order that others can have the same realization.

John Keenan’s translation puts this point a little differently: “But, it might be objected, is it not true that there are no expressions without some [corresponding] reality?” Instead of saying that we’re not talking about anything, he puts it the other way: “What, then, is the reality here? I would reply that it is that reality apart from language and realized in the perfect awakening of the saints through their wisdom and insight apart from all names and words. It is because they desire to lead others to realize perfect awakening that they establish [such expressions] as ‘the unconditioned’ as verbal descriptions.”[3]

The Questions of Dharmodgata

The next questioner is Dharmodgata, whose name can be translated as “elevated through doctrine,” “elevated through dharma,” “offspring of dharma” or “offspring of the teaching.” Unlike Vidhivatpariprcchaka, Dharmodgata asks his questions directly to the buddha. This great bodhisattva starts by telling the buddha where he came from: “Bhagavan, in a distant epoch of ancient times, passing beyond this world system as many world systems as there are grains of sand in seventy-seven Ganges rivers, I lived in the world system Kirtimat, Buddha Land of the Tathagata Visalakirti. While there, I saw 7,700,000 teachers and others of various Tirthika systems.” (25)

To me this is a delightful example of ancient Buddhist texts that understand the vastness of the universe. “I used to live in this place that was really far away, and I lived there a long time ago in ancient times. It’s so far away it took me many, many light years to come here and be with you. Looking back to when I used to be in that buddha land, I remember seeing seven million, seven hundred thousand teachers and others of the Tirthika systems.” *Tirthika* is sometimes translated as “outsider” or “philosopher,” meaning philosophers of non–buddha dharma schools. In this buddha land,

there were many philosophers who weren't open to being disciples of the buddha. These philosophers had gathered together and were considering the ultimate meaning of things but were getting into a big argument about it. "They had divergent opinions, doubts, and misconceptions. They debated and quarreled; they insulted each other with harsh words; they were abusive, deceitful, and overbearing; they attacked one another." (25)

Seeing all this, Dharmodgata thought to himself that tathagatas arise in the world, and through this appearance there is realization of the ultimate that completely transcends all reasoning, argumentation, and deliberation. And Dharmodgata thought that this was indeed marvelous and astonishing.

Then the Buddha commends him: "So it is! Dharmodgata, so it is! I have fully and perfectly realized the ultimate whose character completely transcends all argumentation." (25) This ultimate is the final object on the path. No argumentation applies to it. No argumentation is in it. No reasoning reaches it. No deliberation touches it. As we learned from the previous questions, the ultimate is uncompounded, uncreated, and unmade. It lacks production, and it lacks cessation. But although the ultimate completely transcends the sphere of argumentation and reasoning, it is still something that you can contemplate. And contemplating the ultimate purifies beings of obstructions and resistance to unsurpassed awakening.

Vasubandhu, one of the founders of the Yogacara school of Buddhism, taught the ultimate as being of three kinds: the objective ultimate, the attainment ultimate, and the practice ultimate. These three kinds of ultimate are really one body, because the practice ultimate is the contemplation of the objective ultimate, and that is the attainment ultimate.

The objective ultimate, known as *artha paramartha,* involves considering the ultimate as an object of meditation. It's the thing that when contemplated removes and purifies us of the last of all hindrance to perfect awakening. The objective ultimate is also called suchness, or *tathata.* Thus, the first way we deal with the ultimate is by meditating on it as an object: the object that is the final object.

The next way we deal with the ultimate is in terms of attainment, and that's called *nirvana.* And the last way is the ultimate in terms of practice. That's called *marga,* or the path, the middle path that is the ultimate in practice. So we have some big topics here. One is suchness, the object that purifies all obstructions to enlightenment. Another is nirvana. A third is

practice, the practice that is nirvana, the practice that contemplates that which completely transcends all argumentation.

It might be possible for a bodhisattva like Dharmodgata to go into a situation where there's argumentation and help the beings there. But he doesn't say that he was able to help those people who were arguing and fighting with each other. Instead, when Dharmodgata saw all these people fighting, he left that world system and went to talk to Shakyamuni Buddha. Maybe they weren't ready to stop arguing and meditate on that which completely transcends all argumentation; maybe they weren't ready to let go of deliberation and contemplate that which completely transcends all deliberation—something to which argumentation and deliberation do not apply, something that removes the obstructions to what everybody really wants: nirvana without any attachment to nirvana.

It is important to realize that we all live in the realm of argumentation, conflict, and dispute. Even when you are sitting in a meditation hall, where nobody's talking to you, and nobody's asking you to argue with them, you're still in the realm of argumentation, because there are still conventions, signs, words, and so on. Even if you aren't arguing, there's an ongoing argument happening anyway. Now can you hear the teaching that there's something called the ultimate, which when attained is nirvana, when practiced is the practice of the bodhisattva, and when meditated upon is suchness? While we're arguing, or refusing to argue in an opinionated way, or whatever else we are doing, there's a possibility of simultaneously meditating on the teaching that there's an ultimate to concentrate on that transcends the arguments we're enacting.

Nonviolence and the Ultimate

Shakyamuni Buddha is said to have been a person who had a lot of energy and strength, and he strongly recommended nonviolence. In fact, he said that if you don't practice nonviolence you aren't really his disciple. We have many stories of Shakyamuni and the way he dealt with violent people. One of them concerns a man named Angulimala. Now the Buddha didn't walk around with lots of security people around him like a modern-day political leader. His practice was his only security. One day Angulimala, who was a famous mass murderer, came after the Buddha with the intention to kill him. In one version, the Buddha is able to have a conversation with Angulimala, and he tells him that he is his friend. They talk for quite a while, but in the end, Angulimala just won't accept that Buddha is his

friend. When he decides to kill the Buddha, the Buddha simply walks away. Angulimala starts running after him, but even though he is running and the Buddha is only walking, Angulimala can't catch him. And he yells out to the Buddha, "What's going on? Why can't I catch you? I'm running fast. You're just walking." And the Buddha says, "You can't catch me because I've stopped." Suddenly Angulimala snaps out of his insanity and becomes a student of the Buddha.

What did the Buddha stop? He stopped greed, hate, and delusion. That's why Angulimala couldn't catch him. That's how the Buddha could help him. The Buddha didn't argue with Angulimala. He wasn't opinionated and nasty. He was nonviolent with this violent person. The Buddha, as you may have heard, was said to have supernormal powers. He could have done lots of things to Angulimala with these powers, but what he preferred to use was the power of nonviolence and friendship. He could have thrown Angulimala into another world system pretty easily. But that wasn't what he was into. He was into waking people up from their insanity.

During a recent retreat, a woman who is a lawyer told me that she was defending a mass murderer. Some people wanted to execute him, although in her view he was insane. She wanted to meet this violence, this insane violence, with nonviolence, and protect him from being executed, and to protect society from him and from responding to his violence with more violence. In order to do this, she would have to enter the realm of argumentation, where people would be fiercely attacking her. What does she do then? Should she fiercely attack back? How can she be fierce and nonviolent in her fierceness? How can she enact fierceness not just to protect this one mass murderer but for the welfare of the world? How can she make this a gift without ill will, just intense, warm, powerful energy to wake people up? How can you do that in a situation where people are attacking you and attacking people you're trying to protect? How can you show the wisdom that the Buddha showed Angulimala? That was her dilemma, and that was her spectacular opportunity as a bodhisattva.

I'm proposing that this ultimate, the final object that is there before us all the time, transcends the realm of argumentation. The sages actually realized this, and they used this knowledge in the realm of argumentation to be friendly and kind and to protect beings. How can we meditate on the ultimate, realize it, and then test ourselves by expressing our realization of what completely transcends expression? First of all, you have to remember

the teaching. You have to be mindful of it. You have to listen to it over and over until you can remember the principle that the Buddha realizes, the principle that makes it possible for buddhas to be nonviolent in violent situations. This is what the world needs.

This is a praise of the ultimate, of its power, of its potential to be nonviolent in violent situations. The great gift of this teaching is a banner, a great song of the possibility of being nonviolent. We need this ultimate, because this ultimate is the only thing that makes compassion transcend the realm of violence. The ultimate character of all disputes completely transcends all disputes. The ultimate character of all argumentation, the ultimate character of all agreement, the ultimate character of love, completely transcends all forms and signs and words. And the realization of that ultimate is peace.

The Questions of Suvisuddhamati

The next questions are put to the buddha by the bodhisattva Suvisuddhamati. *Visuddhi* means "purity," and *suvisuddhi* means "purification." *Mati* is intelligence or a certain level of wisdom. So this bodhisattva is named Purified Intelligence. He begins by saying: "Bhagavan, regarding what the Bhagavan formerly said: 'The ultimate, profound and subtle, having a character completely transcending sameness and difference, is difficult to realize.' What the Bhagavan has spoken so eloquently in this way is truly wondrous." (35)

Suvisuddhamati goes on to describe a large group of bodhisattvas who "had gathered together to set about considering the difference or non-difference of the compounded and the ultimate." One bodhisattva said, "The character of the compounded and the character of the ultimate are not different." Another disagreed and said, "The character of the compounded and the character of the ultimate are different," while a third became full of doubts and asked, "Which of these Bodhisattvas is truthful, which is mistaken? Which is properly oriented, which is improperly oriented?" After seeing this, Suvisuddhamati thought, "All these sons and daughters of good lineage have not sought out the ultimate, the subtle character completely transcending difference or non-difference from compounded things. They are all childish, obscured, unclear, unskilled, and they are not properly oriented." (35–37)

The buddha agreed, and asked, "Why is this? Suvisuddhamati, it is because those who investigate the compounded in that way neither realize

the ultimate nor do they manifest the ultimate." (37) If they realized the ultimate and manifested the ultimate, they would also express the realization that the relationship between compounded things and the ultimate transcends sameness and difference.

One of the most important compounded things for disciples of the buddha is the practice of the buddha way. Practice is a compounded thing, a created thing. So among other things, this chapter looks at the relationship between our practice and ultimate reality. Right away, we're told by the buddha that the ultimate transcends being the same as compounded things, like practice, and also transcends being different from them.

This whole issue is very important in the tradition of Soto Zen, because Dogen Zenji, the founder of the school in Japan, said that to think practice and realization are not one is a heretical view. I don't know if he explicitly said that to think that practice and enlightenment are one is also a heretical view, as this sutra shows us. But I would say this oneness completely transcends sameness and difference.

If we carefully analyze phenomena, all constructed things are found to have outflows, to be impure, except one: the path of practice. The path is composed entirely of compounded things, but when the constructed elements of moment-by-moment experience are put together in a certain way called practice, then there is no outflow. There's no impurity. In that case, our constructed, compounded activity is like the uncompounded. Both are pure. There is no concern with gain and loss, existence and nonexistence. There is no sense that you have an experience and you gain something from it, or you have an experience and you lose something from it. You're living in the Middle Way. Because the path is compounded, it is not usually spoken of as the ultimate, even though neither of them have outflows. Yet the path needs to be based on the ultimate, so it is not totally different from the ultimate either.

Most of the time when we are trying to practice the path, there are outflows. What would make it into the pure path with no outflows? If you are being mindful of your state and you notice, for example, that you are seeking after something or leaning toward existence or nonexistence, you could be mindful of that and notice the imbalance. This wouldn't be the path quite yet, but the path requires some kind of awareness like that. Then you would follow the pattern of outflow, the pattern of concern for gain and loss, to the end of gain and loss. Then you would be at the place of practice.

You would exhaust that activity, and in exhausting that activity there is no more gain and loss. There is no more attachment to existence and nonexistence. This is the path. It's still a compounded thing. It's just that it is the total fullness of the compounded activity. That practice is the practice of the sages, which is not totally different from realization, but not totally the same.

The sages exhaust the forms of practice to realize the ultimate. They don't need forms anymore. They are not bound by them. Therefore, gain and loss are one. But does a form like putting our hands together and bowing exist? Does a cross-legged posture exist? Do you think it exists? Are you practicing in a way that you think exists? Are you sitting upright? Do you think it exists? Do you think it doesn't exist? Or are you in the middle between those two extremes? If you're in the middle when you're sitting in meditation, and you're not leaning into it existing and you're not leaning into it not existing, that's the practice of realization. To sit without delving into existence or nonexistence is called wholeheartedly sitting.

Next, the buddha presents some nice arguments for his assertion that relative compounded things and the ultimate are neither the same nor different: "Suvisuddhamati, if the character of the compounded and the character of the ultimate were not different, then, because of that, even all ordinary childish beings would see the truth and, while still mere ordinary beings, would attain [the highest achievement] and would even achieve the highest bliss of nirvana. Moreover, they would completely and perfectly realize unsurpassed, perfect enlightenment" (37–39) In other words, if everyday practices and the ultimate were the same, then everybody would be perfectly enlightened, which is not the case.

He goes on to say that if the character of the compounded and the ultimate were different, even enlightened beings would not be free of the signs of the compounded. And since "they would not be free from the signs of the compounded, even those who see the truth would not be liberated from the bondage of signs. If they were not liberated from the bondage of signs, then they would also not be liberated from the bondage of errant tendencies. If they were not liberated from these two bonds, then those who see the truth would not attain [the highest achievement], and would not achieve the highest bliss of nirvana. Furthermore, they would not completely and perfectly realize unsurpassed, perfect enlightenment." (39)

If practices and the ultimate were totally different, then those who realize the truth through practices would be stuck in the practices they use to realize the truth. In other words, those who practice in a way that realizes enlightenment would be bound by the forms of practice, because the freedom of the ultimate would be totally different from their practices. So the sages would not be free. But the sages are free. Therefore, their practice must not be totally different from realization, from the ultimate. No enlightenment would be possible if practices and the ultimate were totally different, and if they were totally the same, everybody would be enlightened already. They transcend difference by being the same, and they transcend sameness by being different. That's their relationship. It's free of sameness or difference.

What is implied is that enlightenment is here all the time. There are buddhas right here and right now, and there always have been. The buddha way of being is here now, but it's not the way of ordinary people. Ordinary people have outflows. They're still into gain and loss, existence and nonexistence. So they're not totally the same as the ultimate. But they're not totally separate from the ultimate either, because the ultimate is the character of their ordinariness.

Next we get to a part of the sutra where the translations from the Tibetan and the Chinese seem to be quite different. Powers's translation from the Tibetan says: "Suvisuddhamati, it is not the case that seers of truth are free from the signs of the compounded; they are simply free. Moreover, seers of truth are not liberated from the bondage of signs, but they are liberated. Seers of truth are not liberated from the bondage of errant tendencies, but they are liberated." (41)

But Cleary's translation from the Chinese renders this passage as follows: "It is not the case, furthermore, that those who see the truth are not able to do away with the forms of practices; and indeed they do dismiss them. And it is not the case that those who see the truth are unable to shed bondage to forms; and they are indeed liberated. And it is not the case that those who see the truth are unable to shed crude bondage to the physical self; and they are indeed liberated."[4]

So the translations from the Chinese say that the seers of truth are liberated from those types of bondage, and the Tibetan says they are not.

I've noticed that when you have an original text that is translated into different languages, the places where the translations are the most different

are usually where the original is the most intense. The translations veer away because they're trying to get something difficult and profound into some reasonable translation. Sometimes it's so intense that one goes one way and the other goes another way.

The pivot here is around whether or not those who see the truth are freed from bondage to forms and practices. One version tells us they can do away with the forms, but the other says they don't actually do it. Why not? Because they want to benefit others. They could do away with the forms because they are free of them. But they don't, so they are "not liberated from bondage" even though they are free. Because they are bodhisattvas, they have to have the forms, even though they could do without them. It is not because they're stuck in the forms but because they need to use them to help others who are stuck. Probably the original somehow had all that in it. The bodhisattvas are completely free of the forms and yet not.

The Tibetan translation is a little bit more clearly bodhisattvic. In fact, it's so bodhisattvic, it is hard to understand. How could bodhisattvas be liberated and still be bound? Yet that is what is says. Bodhisattvas go into bondage, and it's a real bondage, except that it's a real bondage based on the realization that there aren't any real bondages. But they take on the bonds just as much as anybody else. They could do away with the bonds, but their vows won't let them. They have the skills. They can go to nirvana very easily because they're not afraid of samsara. But when they go, they want to come back to help all beings.

The bodhisattva's main job is to come and play this game of using forms to show people how to be liberated from forms. In some sense, they pretend to be stuck in the form, and so they come into bondage. They need to come into bondage in order to show others how to work with bondage from the perspective of liberation. When they work with these compounded forms, their practices are based on the realization of the emptiness of the forms, a realization of how to work with compounded things for the sake of all beings.

Bodhisattvas consciously and willingly enter into the bondage and suffering of birth and death for the sake of all beings. They really get in there and take it on fully. It isn't like, "Hey, you poor guys suffering down there. Up here I'm free!" Bodhisattvas enter into the suffering so they can say, "It's hard in here, isn't it?" And they can ask, "Now how can we work with this bondage?" Bodhisattvas could do away with their own bondage,

but if they did, that would be like looking down on those of us who are suffering.

When I was younger, sometimes when I would go home on the breaks during the *sesshins* at San Francisco Zen Center, I would find my wife and daughter caught in struggle. I would glide in there on my *samadhi* carpet, and I would bless their difficulties. They weren't in bondage to the forms of compounded practice; they were in bondage to this big struggle between them. They didn't get too angry with me for my above-it-all attitude, but they found me quite irrelevant, and they were kind of glad when the break would end and I would go back to samadhiville. Then in one sesshin, I was in so much pain I could hardly sit. I managed to finish the sesshin, but I was really having a hard time. I could barely walk. During that sesshin, when I came home, I wasn't looking down on my wife and daughter from the elevated position of not being bound by practices or errant tendencies. I was kind of liberated, but because of my own pain I really had compassion for their suffering. Then they found me quite relevant, and they were even sorry when the breaks were over. They liked having this suffering person coming and being with them, someone who didn't look down on them, someone who looked eye-to-eye with them, or maybe even up.

The buddha presents another line of argument to show us that the compounded and the ultimate are not the same or different. "Suvisuddhamati, if the character of the compounded and the character of the ultimate were not different, then just as the character of the compounded would be included in the afflicted character, the character of the ultimate would also be included in the afflicted character." (41)

As I mentioned earlier, compounded phenomena are phenomena that have outflows. They are impure. But if the ultimate were not different from the compounded practices, then they would also be included in the impure, which is not true. While the compounded is included in the afflicted, the uncompounded, the ultimate, is not. Emptiness doesn't have outflows. So the character of the ultimate is not included in the character of the afflicted.

"Suvisuddhamati, if the character of the compounded and the character of the ultimate were different, then the ultimate character within all characters of compounded things would not be their general character." (41–43) If compounded things and practices were totally different from the ultimate, then the ultimate character would not be the common character within all compounded things. But the ultimate character of phenomena is their

common or general character. All compounded things are empty. Emptiness is the common characteristic, the ultimate truth, the ultimate meaning of events that is common to them all. But if this ultimate meaning of events were completely different from the events themselves, it could not be common to them all. It could be a little different, just not completely different. Because if it wasn't at least a little bit different, then it would have to be the same. But actually it can sometimes be different and sometimes be the same, and in this way, it completely and perfectly transcends all this sameness and difference.

"Moreover, Suvisuddhamati, if the character of the compounded and the character of the ultimate were not different, then just as the ultimate character does not differ within all characters of compounded things, so also all the characters of compounded things would not differ." (43) If the compounded and the uncompounded are not different, then just as the ultimate does not differ among the compounded things, the compounded things would not differ from each other. But compounded things do differ. They differ totally from each other. They just don't totally differ from the ultimate. In some ways, compounded things like you and me are actually closer to the ultimate truth than we are to each other. We're totally different from each other. We're even totally different from the way we were a second ago—related but totally different. But we're not different from the ultimate, and we're not the same. So we're really more intimate with the ultimate than we are with other compounded things, even though we depend on them all.

Next, the buddha gives us some analogies to help us understand the way the ultimate is not the same or different from compounded things. He points out the characteristics of several common things that are not the same or different from the thing itself. "Suvisuddhamati, for instance, it is not easy to designate the whiteness of a conch as being a character that is different from the conch or as being a character that is not different from it." (45) You might be able to pull it off, but it's not easy to say that the whiteness is different from a white conch shell. But it's also hard to say the whiteness is the same as the conch shell. It's not different, and it's not the same. Buddha goes on to give a variety of similar examples, including the yellowness of gold, the softness of cotton, the heat of a pepper, and the agitating and afflicting character of desire. It's hard to separate any affliction from the obscurations that come with it. For example, take hatred. Somehow we

don’t feel that the affliction of hatred is exactly the same as the hatred, but we don’t see them as separate either.

Buddha ends his dialogue with Suvisuddhamati with a verse:

> The character of the compounded realm and of the ultimate
> is a character devoid of sameness and difference.
> Those who impute sameness and difference
> are improperly oriented. (49)

This verse offers a new idea that goes a bit beyond what was said before. The earlier discussion started off by saying that the ultimate transcends sameness and difference. Then some examples of ordinary things, like peppers and their heat, were offered. Then the sutra tells us that it’s actually hard to say whether heat and the pepper are the same or different. This new statement says that when you look at the pepper and heat and you see either sameness or difference between them, your orientation is off. So the buddha first says that it’s hard to discriminate between compounded phenomena and their characteristics. Then he says that even if you’re able to make such discriminations, your orientation is still off. Whenever we impute sameness or difference to the relationship between compounded things and the ultimate, we are disoriented.

Someone might, for example, ask you to tell them whether a compounded thing and its ultimate character were the same or different. If you considered the matter, you might not be able to find any sameness or difference. At that point, you are not yet disoriented. You haven’t found a landing pad for your imputation of sameness or difference. You were invited to do it, you tried, but you can’t do it. So in this you are oriented correctly. Even though you are trying to get disoriented, you haven’t been able to yet. When you really look at somebody and you don’t know whether they’re the same or different from you, that’s very close to the way buddhas see things. Buddha doesn’t actually see people as different from her, and buddha doesn’t see them as the same, either. She just sees them. But that’s hard for us to learn. That’s what we have the sutra for: to learn this amazing orientation.

The Questions of Subhuti

The next questioner is the monk Subhuti, who is also the main questioner in many of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras. Subhuti was praised by Shakyamuni Buddha as the foremost of his disciples in the understanding of emptiness. This section begins with the buddha asking him a question:

“Subhuti, in the realms of sentient beings, how many sentient beings do you think there are who communicate their understanding under the influence of conceit? In the realms of sentient beings, how many sentient beings do you think there are who communicate their understanding without conceit?” (53)

Subhuti replies: “Bhagavan, I think that in the realms of sentient beings, those sentient beings who communicate their understanding without conceit are few. Bhagavan, I think that in the realms of sentient beings, sentient beings who communicate their understanding under the influence of conceit are immeasurable, countless, and inexpressible [in number].” (53)

There are three kinds of conceit or pride: pride in apprehending objects, pride in apprehending subjects, and pride in thoroughly differentiating character. In one of the traditional presentations in the Buddhist tradition, it is held that there are five paths to liberation. The first is the path of preparation; the second is the path of concerted effort; the third is the path of vision; the fourth is the path of meditation; the fifth is the path beyond training. On the third path, the path of vision, one sees the illusory nature of belief in a substantial self. But even once someone has been liberated from belief in the substantiality of the self or person, they still have lots of latent tendencies that were developed during the time when they did think that way. They may then enter the fourth path, a long process of meditative purification. On this path, they apply insight into nonself to their conduct, over and over again, and are thereby purified, freed from these latent tendencies. The latent tendencies are scrubbed clean by the insight into the insubstantiality of self, until the whole being of the practitioner comes into accord with this insight. The final latent tendency to be overcome is pride or conceit.

It is very tempting for people who are that advanced to be conceited or prideful, because they’ve gone a long way. They are amazingly evolved beings. And when you’re amazingly evolved, you might be kind of conceited. Ordinary human beings are actually pretty amazingly evolved creatures too, and they also tend to be proud and conceited. But Subhuti didn’t say, “I went to a bar in the city, and there were a bunch of conceited people there.” He says even in a monastery, where people are sincerely studying all these subtle topics of buddha’s teaching and buddha’s wisdom instructions, all but a few are still speaking with some conceit.

The buddha has an understanding of the ultimate character of various phenomena, but the buddha is not proud. Buddha is not the only one, however. Some sentient beings also have an understanding and are not proud of it. And those who are not proud of their understanding are ready to open to and seek the ultimate. But according to this sutra they are few, while the proud ones are innumerable.

It is likely, therefore, that most of us are among the proud ones. And this sutra is saying to us, "Well, you should work with that, because that's going to make it hard for you to understand the ultimate." So work on your pride. Become aware of it. Learn what that pride is. Learn what your conceit is. Become intimate with them. Once you are intimate with them, pride and conceit drop away. If you can drop them, you can open to the ultimate, and you can open to the one taste of all things, which will then purify all phenomena of self-clinging. And it isn't just you that will be purified. Everything will be purified. Bodhisattvas want to learn to purify all phenomena and free all beings. An understanding of the ultimate is necessary for this, and in order to receive it, we have to find antidotes for our pride, which are the various modes of intimacy with pride itself.

Next, Subhuti tells the buddha a story about a group of proud monks he had known. He once lived in a great forest hermitage, where a group of monks got together one morning and "communicated their understanding by describing what they had manifestly realized through observing the various forms of phenomena." (53) I might rephrase this by saying, At that time, those monks communicated their understanding *under the influence of conceit* by describing what they had manifestly realized through observing various forms of phenomena. Subhuti describes the many types of phenomena that these monks observed and contemplated, each one of them a basic category buddha used to teach us how to guide our meditation.

The first monk contemplated the five aggregates, the five categories of experience of psychophysical being. This basic Buddhist meditation involves observing the body, feelings, conceptions, various kinds of mental formations, and consciousness. Subhuti goes into detail about how the monk did this meditation. He observed the signs of the aggregates, the arising of the aggregates, the disintegration of the aggregates, and the cessation of the aggregates, and he observed the actualization of the cessation of the aggregates. Subhuti goes on to describe how a different monk meditated on the sense fields, and another contemplated the buddha's

teaching of dependent co-arising, and on and on, until finally coming to one who meditated on the eightfold path.

The monks in this story were not just practicing the contemplations the buddha offered; they had actually gained some understanding of them, as well. Then they communicated their understanding of all these wonderful modes of analytic wisdom to each other. But Subhuti says, "Having seen them, I thought: 'These venerable persons communicate their understandings by describing their manifest realization of the various forms of phenomena, and, in this way, they do not seek the ultimate whose character is all of one taste.'" (57) And because they did not seek the ultimate whose character is all of one taste, Subhuti concluded that these venerable persons were possessed by conceit. They realized and approved only their own understanding, not the one taste of the ultimate that pervades everything.

When we are possessed by conceit, we are able to present our understanding only under the influence of conceit. We are interested only in our own understanding rather than the ultimate, because we think we have a nice understanding, and we think it's sufficient. But when we are proud of our understanding, it is difficult for us to move beyond it and open to the ultimate. This warning about the conceit among these highly evolved beings is something for us to receive into our hearts as we enter into the rest of this sutra. We need to keep remembering that pride and conceit are traps that we always have to watch out for when we're studying dharma.

Subhuti goes on to praise the buddha for this wondrous understanding of the ultimate. "Bhagavan, regarding what the Bhagavan formerly said: 'The ultimate is profound and subtle, very difficult to realize, supremely difficult to realize, and it is of a character that is all of one taste.' What the Bhagavan said so eloquently in this way is wondrous." (57–59)

And the buddha replies: "So it is! Subhuti, so it is! I have perfectly and completely realized the ultimate having a character that is all of one taste, which is subtle, supremely subtle, profound, supremely profound, difficult to realize, supremely difficult to realize." (59)

How can there be no conceit in the buddha's confident proclamation of his understanding of the ultimate? It sounds as though there is some conceit, but he is simply stating the truth of his realization. What would be conceited would be for him to pretend he didn't have this understanding, so

that he would seem more humble. Hiding an understanding that we are attached to is often an unrecognized form of pride.

“Having perfectly and manifestly realized this, I have proclaimed it and made it clear, opened it up and systematized it, and taught it comprehensively. Why is this so? Subhuti, I teach that the object of observation for purification of the aggregates is the ‘ultimate.’” (59)

Why is this so? Why did the buddha go to all the trouble to make it clear and proclaim and systematize this teaching? He made this effort to teach the ultimate because this ultimate is the object that, when contemplated, purifies the aggregates. It doesn’t just purify you, the person, it purifies what you are made of. It purifies your eyes, your ears, and your nose. It purifies the colors and smells and tastes. It purifies your feelings. It purifies your perceptions and your concepts. It purifies your greed, hate, and delusion. It purifies your faith. It purifies your consciousness. It purifies all that makes you. And it purifies “you” and “me” from mistaking all that makes us as something substantial. It purifies us from thinking that we are something substantial. It removes all obstacles to unsurpassed, complete, and authentic awakening. This awakening, in turn, removes all obstacles to us truly benefiting all beings.

That’s why the buddha makes such a big effort to teach the ultimate: the ultimate is what purifies all phenomena and unfolds the boundless benefits of buddha’s wisdom and compassion. This process of purification penetrates all the teachings and practices of the buddhas. It starts with the aggregates, but then it goes on to purify the sense fields, dependent co-arising, the four foundations of mindfulness, the eightfold path, and all the different elements.

The buddha points out that no matter what the objects of observation, the ultimate they reflect is always the same. “Just as it is with the aggregates, so also that which is the object of observation for purification of [phenomena] ranging from the sense spheres up to the eight branches of the path of the Aryas is all of one taste: Its character does not differ.” (61) The object of observation is the same for the purification of all phenomena, and it has one taste.

Someone recently told me about a news clipping from 1996 that shows a photograph of an African American woman putting her body between a white Klansman who was part of a Klan rally and a group of people who were protesting the Klan. At first glance, it appeared she was protecting

somebody from the Klansman. But actually she was protecting this Klansman from her own people. I feel that this was a moment without conceit. Maybe she also had the ability to see the one taste in all human life and to see the one taste in all phenomena. Maybe she could see the one taste in the Klansman and the one taste in the protestors. Because she could see that, and because she wasn't proud of her understanding that these are the protestors and these are the Klansmen, maybe she didn't really strongly apprehend those visions. Then she could move into the position of protecting all beings. In doing that, she is demonstrating the ultimate and teaching us that everything has one taste.

The four questioners we have met so far, Vidhivatpariprcchaka, Dharmodgata, Suvisuddhamati, and Subhuti, lead the buddha to tell us a lot about the ultimate. Vidhivatpariprcchaka's questions to Gambhirarthasamdhinirmocana make it clear that the ultimate is inexpressible and nondual. Dharmodgata shows us that it transcends all argumentation. Suvisuddhamati leads us to the understanding that the ultimate transcends sameness and difference. And Subhuti helps us to realize that the ultimate is all of one taste. Now we can carry this understanding of the ultimate with us as a foundation as we explore the rest of this sutra.

chapter four

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION

EACH CHAPTER of this sutra expresses the profound, unfathomable wisdom of the buddha, but each from a different perspective. This chapter has a psychological orientation. It lays the foundations for understanding our consciousness by showing us how it develops, what the different types of consciousness are, how they operate, and what it means to be wise with respect to mind, thought, and consciousness.

The questioner in this chapter is the great bodhisattva Visalamati. His name literally means "extensive intelligence," and it is said that his knowledge and wisdom are limitless. "Bhagavan," he asks, "when you say, 'Bodhisattvas are wise with respect to the secrets of mind, thought, and consciousness,' . . . Bhagavan, just how are Bodhisattvas wise with respect to the secrets of mind, thought, and consciousness? For what reason does the Tathagata designate a Bodhisattva as wise with respect to the secrets of mind, thought, and consciousness?" (69)

The Sanskrit word for mind used in the original text is *citta.* Thought is *manas,* and consciousness is *vijnana.* Citta as used in this sutra is the total impression and basic awareness, manas is the reflection upon what is known, and vijnana is the discrimination of what is known. The various schools of Buddhism hold that there are anywhere between six and eight types of consciousness, or vijnana. While mind (citta) is ever present and always of the same quality, the consciousnesses are evolving, transforming, arising, and perishing. In each moment of life there is mind, but the various kinds of consciousness usually come and go.

Alaya, the basis consciousness, is called a vijnana, and it is also called mind (citta). But we do not call the consciousnesses that arise from the senses mind. Alaya is actually a consciousness that is present every moment the body functions. If there is a body with functioning sense organs, alaya is there. It is called the basis or storehouse consciousness because it is the foundation that underlies the other consciousnesses and because it stores or holds our karmic predispositions—all the results of our past actions and the common predispositions we are all born with, such as the tendency to see the world in terms of self and other.

The sutra goes on: "The Bhagavan replied to the Bodhisattva Visalamati: 'Visalamati, you are involved in [asking] this in order to benefit many beings, to bring happiness to many beings, out of sympathy for the world,

and for the sake of the welfare, benefit, and happiness of many beings, including gods and humans. Your intention in questioning the Tathagata about this subject is good. It is good! Therefore, Visalamati, listen well and I will describe for you the way [Bodhisattvas] are wise with respect to the secrets of mind, thought, and consciousness.'" (69)

So the buddha responds to bodhisattva Visalamati by saying, "Thank you for such a good question. Please listen." The bodhisattva asks this question about mind, consciousness, and intellect, and the buddha tells us that he asks this question out of the concern for the welfare of all beings. I think the buddha says that because one might wonder, What is beneficial about that question? Some people may feel that the kind of psychological understanding this chapter presents is not necessary to follow the path, but it really is. One of the important things this psychological teaching does is to describe how people are not wise, and why the dharma is so hidden from us. It shows us that we have a vast sea of subconscious tendencies and predispositions, those that we are born with and those that are laid down as a result of our actions, and that these tendencies live in the subconscious storehouse known as the alaya. When these subconscious tendencies ripen in the active discriminating consciousnesses, they prevent us from seeing things as they are. It also talks about how studying these teachings can remove these obscurations and enable us to see the dharma as it is. It shows us how everything arises and how studying alaya, understanding it, and meditating on it transform it into wisdom, so there are no predispositions left, or they are at least pacified.

The Alaya

The concept of the alaya, or alaya vijnana, is one of the most important and controversial in all the Buddhist teachings, and this sutra may be the earliest text to mention it as a separate component of experience. The buddha tells Visalamati that all sentient beings in this cyclic existence manifest a body. And that: "Initially, in dependence upon two types of appropriation—the appropriation of the physical sense powers associated with a support and the appropriation of predispositions which proliferate conventional designations with respect to signs, names, and concepts—the mind which has all seeds ripens; it develops, increases, and expands in its operations." (69–71)

The buddha goes on to tell Visalamati that this "consciousness is also called the 'appropriating consciousness' because it holds and appropriates

the body in that way. It is called the ‘basis-consciousness’ because there is the same establishment and abiding within those bodies. Thus they are wholly connected and thoroughly connected. It is called ‘mind’ because it collects and accumulates forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and tangible objects.” (71)

I hear the buddha as saying that when beings are first formed, they arise in dependence on two types of appropriation: appropriation of the sense powers and capacities, and appropriation of predispositions. What kind of predispositions? Predispositions that proliferate conventional designations with respect to signs, names, and concepts. This initial appropriation is called the appropriating consciousness, or *adana vijnana.* It is also called basis or container consciousness, which is a translation of *alaya vijnana,* because it has the same establishment and abiding as the body and the sense powers. Adana is different from alaya in the sense that it is the first moment of connection with the sense powers. The sutra also says that alaya is a vijnana—a type of consciousness. It is a vijnana partly because it is connected to sense powers. But it also says that alaya is mind because it accumulates all sounds, tastes, and so on. So it is a vijnana, a particular type of consciousness, but it is also called mind.

In early Buddhism, the term *alaya* referred to the field of objects we perceive. Later Buddhists developed this and thought that maybe this field of objects, this alaya, could be used to explain other phenomena. One of the problems the early Buddhists had was that when yogis went into certain deep trances where their active sense consciousnesses were almost completely suppressed, they would close their eyes, enter trance for a long time, and then would open their eyes again, and it would seem that they had had their eyes closed for only a moment. They would have no experiences in between, and they wondered how it was that life could continue in such a deep trance. They were also puzzled by the way monks could spontaneously come out of their trance even after all mental activity had stopped. They thought there must be consciousness going on between those two waking states. If consciousness leaves the body, the warmth goes away and you die. So there must be some level of consciousness, some vital principle, that continues even in the state where the mind is not functioning in an ordinary way. They thought that might be alaya, because even when the consciousnesses became deactivated, this basic storage consciousness

was still going on. So that is one way that they came up with the word *alaya,* that it's the storing of consciousness.

Early Buddhism didn't emphasize this very much, but later Buddhists realized that it would be helpful to have such a concept—something like a subconscious, something accounting for the sense of continuity in the life-stream, and for rebirth and the continuation of consciousness after the dissolution of the body. They developed the idea that this deep unconscious was actually a fundamental, ongoing component of a personality.

One way to understand alaya is that it is down at the base of the active consciousnesses. It is also what the sense of self lies on or identifies with. Originally mind isn't divided into self and other, but once that split occurs, the self needs something to hang on to. It doesn't work very well for the sense of self to identify with the active consciousnesses because they are always changing. It can't hold on to the other; that doesn't work either. It's born of the other, but it can't identify with the other. Awareness itself isn't a very good home, because if you look at it, it is ungraspable vastness. Where the self seems to find its home is in alaya, the field from which all the concepts are made. There is a vague sense of something deeply subconscious that is always going on. It's not the self, but it's something you can hook the idea of self on to. As David Kalupahana says, it's something life can be moored to even during a deep trance, when it can't moor itself to the active consciousnesses.

This section of the sutra offers a description of the process of illusion wherein the mind imagines itself split into subject and object. Alaya is the transformation of mind that stores the seed of the concept of division, and using that concept, the mind can appear to divide itself. When it does that, it is further transformed. Alaya is the transformation of mind that the idea of self lies on and hooks on to. The idea of self in turn makes karma possible. Karma has a momentum, and the momentum of karma transforms this basis consciousness. Thus alaya carries the effects of past karma to our present life.

Although the mind cannot really split itself, at a certain point in the development of life, the mind manifests its ability to appear as split into a sense of self and a sense of other. The activity that results from this deceptive division of life into self and other is karma, and all the implications and impressions of such karmic activity hook into alaya, lie down in it, and are stored in it.

Alaya also provides the ongoing place, the ultimate, deepest place of refuge for the self. It's the deepest, darkest hiding place for self-clinging. Because of the alaya, you'll never be without a place to hold on and be attached. And the place of enlightenment, the actual texture and content of enlightenment, the place it will be enacted, is in this deepest, darkest hiding place of clinging. All the effort to release other clinging won't work until you get down to the bottom one. When that's dealt with, then the place where you are clinging will be exactly the place of release. What was obscuring the nature of life will be the place of liberation.

Karmic habits are impressed on alaya vijnana, and alaya vijnana arises with and supports the karmic habits of the six active sense consciousnesses. The results of karma never get lost, so this subconscious layer of past karma is always present in a living being, and the self can lie down there and be connected to that. The self can then pull up the karmic habits in the alaya and create more karma, which in turn gets laid back down into alaya.

Because alaya evolves, it has a story. It has a history. There's even a creation myth: In the beginning, there is the unborn, and it is beyond all characteristics. Then it becomes like a river that flows and changes. How does the unborn become a river? By transforming itself into alaya, object of consciousness and reflection. That's how you get the sense of separation of self and other. As this system develops, it is always hungry, always thirsty, always changing. It is hungry to be reunited. Even though there is nothing to be reunited with but itself, it is still split. Eventually, after countless lifetimes and much suffering and confusion, it gets reunited again. It is reunited with its unknown aspect, because its unknown aspect is totally implied by its present form. The known and unknown, the split in consciousness that creates self and other, are unified. Then the defilements have nothing to hold to, because the self is not separated from the other anymore. So the afflictions drop away. There's no way to be harassed anymore. There's no way to worry about survival anymore.

There is a theory that alaya is present from the moment of conception until the moment of death. In this view, the birth of a living being depends upon alaya hooking onto a body at the moment of conception. At the moment of death, it is alaya disconnecting from the body that makes life irretrievable. During the whole course of life, the body is hooked into alaya, and even if the evolving six consciousnesses are radically suppressed, there is still alaya vijnana in the body or there will be death. Alaya becomes

almost the same as the principle of vitality or warmth. We do have a consciousness of the warmth of the body, but we are not actively aware of the warm storehouse consciousness that supports all active consciousnesses.

Some people say, “I have a sense of self.” What they have is a sense that one or more of the five psychophysical components of experience is a self, and that sense of self is laid down in alaya. In a Pali scripture in which the buddha talks about alaya, he says that human progeny are delighted by alaya, excited by alaya. By these progeny delighting in alaya, and being excited by alaya, the dependent co-arising of situations is not easily perceived.

In our usual way of being, as we are walking around in the world, we’re delighted by alaya. Delighting in alaya means that we regard the objects of our awareness as independent things. That is to say, we ignore the dependent co-arising of alaya and its contents. Alaya, the storehouse of all objects that we regard as existing independently, comes to be a synonym for the defiled attitudes it stores. But originally alaya is neutral. It’s just the capacity of the mind to accumulate the results of its own functioning. But as it stores defiling attitudes, it gradually becomes the source and hitching post for defilement. These defiling views obstruct our vision of interdependence. Then the fruits of those views are laid down in alaya, and alaya becomes the seedbed for further defiling views to sprout, the results of which are in turn laid back down in alaya.

Alaya is the foundational cognition upon which conscious awareness of objects is built. It is the basis upon which I see you, the mountains and rivers, and the great earth as separate. Alaya is the storehouse where the results of such dualistic visions are laid down, and in turn it becomes an ongoing support for the continued production of dualistic perceptions that obscure our vision of reality. It obscures the vision of our dependent co-arising, the fact that subject and object cocreate each other. If I look at you, I can use my eyes, and I can use the light bouncing off you. I have consciousness, and I wouldn’t be able to see you if it weren’t for you, but you wouldn’t be there if it weren’t for me. Without meditating on things that way, I just delight in people as objects.

An earlier English translation of the Pali scripture cited above reads “human progeny are delighted by sensual pleasure.” The word translated here as “sensual pleasure” is *alaya.* The translator may have consulted with some Theravadin monks who recommended translating *alaya* as “sensual

pleasure," because they knew that the kind of sensory experience that is seductive is one in which the object of experience is seen as independent. Sensual pleasure here means to feel pleasure in experiencing sense objects as substantial. To feel pleasure experiencing the insubstantiality of sense objects is dharma pleasure, pleasure in the truth.

Alaya is spoken of as the mind where the results of karma are stored, an unconscious cognitive realm where the results stick, where all our dispositions are laid down. When we have a conscious experience, we don't experience all of alaya. We experience the maturing of part of alaya, which is being reflected in conscious awareness. We are thinking about one object among infinite possible objects. When we think about one little piece of alaya, unless we are deeply settled, the mind tends to become excited and agitated about it. If we are excited about trees, red tablecloths, and breakfast, if we are excited about these reflections that are arising in dependence on alaya, then we don't see dependent co-arising. We don't see the causation, and therefore we don't realize the appeasement of all dispositions. We don't realize the relinquishment of all grasping, we don't realize the cessation of craving, and we don't realize freedom.

In these deluded mental states, there is excitement in sensing objects as separate. Based on this false view of separateness, there arises a view of a separate self. There is affliction, because the sense of self always arises with the four afflictions of self: self-view, self-pride, self-love, and ignorance. So we're constantly afflicted, and we simultaneously delight in sensual pleasure; they go together. But the misery is not what is obscuring the process. Misery is the result of the process being obscured. The obscuration is due to our looking at those little mirrors of active consciousness reflecting alaya and saying, "Wow, that's a thing existing by itself," rather than, "What is it?"

At the center of calmly asking, "What is it?" there is no obscuration. When we don't regard objects with the serene mind of "What is it?" we look at life as if we're riding in a boat separate from the water, and we're looking out at the water around us. When you penetrate the process of the self and see through it, you see that the self isn't a boat; it's just a dynamic interactive process. When you see things that way, further dispositions are not laid down. When the unconscious dispositions mature and are reflected in your active awareness, you can care for and study them. You can't look down into alaya where the dispositions are laid. You can only become

aware of them as they mature within active karmic consciousness. Then you get to see that there is a predisposition toward some action or some way of thinking or feeling. You see that when a specific person talks to you in a certain way, you have a predisposition to respond in a specific way.

The whole universe is operating through this sense of riding in a boat. The whole universe is operating through this perception of the person. The whole universe is operating through the way you think and perceive. If you tune in to this, you will penetrate the illusion of self, and then you will realize the appeasement of the dispositions. You will realize dependent co-arising and the relinquishment of all grasping. You will realize the end of suffering. Through your uprightness, you will start to open up to the complexity of things and realize this dance for what it is.

Despite its usefulness, the concept of the alaya can be dangerous, because it looks so much like a substantial self. And if you look at it that way, it promotes all the suffering and attachment from which we are trying to liberate all beings. The buddha ends this chapter of Visalamati's questions with a little poem that drives home this point:

> If the appropriating consciousness, deep and subtle,
> all its seeds flowing like a river,
> were conceived as a self, that would not be right.
> Thus I have not taught this to children. (77)

Sometimes, instead of *children* this last word is translated as "the foolish" or "the ignorant."

Alaya is not a soul or an independent self, because it only exists at this moment by causes and conditions, just as life is not a self, because it is only something that is conjured up right now. If we take away the causes and conditions for life, we have what is called death. If we have the causes and conditions for life, there is some warmth and consciousness. Alaya is also dependently co-arisen. It's not a permanent self. It is impermanent, and it has no inherent existence.

The Six Consciousnesses

After introducing this explicit concept of the alaya, the sutra tells us how the six other consciousnesses, which were described in early Buddhism, depend upon it: "Visalamati, the sixfold collection of consciousness—the eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, and mind consciousness—arises depending upon and abiding in that appropriating consciousness. An eye

consciousness arises depending on an eye and a form in association with consciousness. Functioning together with that eye consciousness, a conceptual mental consciousness arises at the same time, having the same objective reference.

"Visalamati, [an ear consciousness, a nose consciousness, a tongue consciousness, and] a bodily consciousness arise depending on an ear, a nose, a tongue, and a body in association with consciousness and [sound, smell, taste, and] tangibles. Functioning together with [nose, ear, tongue, and bodily] consciousness, a conceptual mental consciousness arises at the same time, having the same objective reference." (71–73)

In order to understand what these six sense consciousnesses are and how they evolve, it might be useful to tell a story about the origins of consciousness in terms of materiality. There are two kinds of materiality, gross and subtle, or inorganic and organic. By studying the evolution of the five material sense consciousnesses, we can develop a story that will help us understand the arising and evolution of the sixth sense consciousness, the mind consciousness that accompanies the five material sense consciousnesses.

The structure of five sense consciousnesses is basically the same as the structure of mind sense consciousness. The difference is that while sense consciousness arises from the interactions of the two kinds of materiality, gross and subtle sense organ and sense field, mind consciousness arises from the interaction of nonmaterial things. At a certain point in evolution, sense consciousness developed a way to be sensitive to and aware of itself. First, there is a dance between the subtle and the gross materiality; then an overall impression of the dance arises. This is the sense consciousness. From this overall impression comes the ability to be aware of the field, the gross partner in the dance. The interaction of the organ and its field becomes the pattern for this discriminating aspect of consciousness. This consciousness becomes aware of the field, not of the organ, and now finally the field becomes an object of consciousness.

The organ is subtle, as though it can be seen through. Its appearance of being located between the consciousness and its objects serves as a basis for the illusion of separation. The structural relationship between consciousness, organ, and object becomes a template for the image or idea of the separation of consciousness and object. We can both see through the organ and be separated by it. If the organ weren't subtle, it would block the

consciousness from being aware of the field. If it were too subtle, consciousness and its objects would merge, and there would be no appearance of object or separation. Without that apparent separation, there would be no consciousness. In a sense, it's as though the consciousness can see through the organ, but the organ still separates the consciousness from its object of awareness.

This paradigm, in which the field for the organ is the object for the consciousness, gets reenacted in mind consciousness. Just as the object of a sense consciousness is the organ's field of activity and the sense organ seems to separate consciousness from its objects, the mind organ seems to separate mind consciousness from its objects, effectively splitting itself into two parts—an object part and a subject part. Mind consciousness arises out of such a dynamic.

Sense consciousness is direct perception. There are no concepts mediating such perception. Even though this level of experience is going on all the time for us, it is not objectively known, it is not clearly ascertained. Take, for example, the sense awareness of the physicality of light. There is no objective knowledge of this physicality, but we experience a physical sense awareness that affects us in a given moment. Eye consciousness at the sensory level is something that dependently co-arises with the field of light and the eye organ. It is a direct sensory experience of physical light, but seeing is not the light, not the organ, and not the consciousness. Seeing is the interplay, the interdependence, of organ, field, and consciousness. It is something that happens at the moment consciousness is born together with the organ and field. Thus consciousness, organ, and field have no inherent nature, nor does seeing as a direct sensory experience. Seeing at the next level, that of objective knowing, is an awareness that is mediated by a concept, such as color. There can be an eye sense consciousness of blue and, at the same time, a mind sense consciousness that the object is blue. This mind sense consciousness dependently co-arises in a way analogous to the five sense consciousnesses from the interdependence of mind-consciousness, mind-organ, and mind-objects.

In other words, there are two kinds of seeing—seeing as direct sensory perception of color and seeing as conceptual cognition of the idea of color. First, there is an awareness of an actual material object, electromagnetic radiation. This is the realm of the direct perception of different wavelengths of radiation, which are not yet categorized as, for example, blue. Although

they're not yet called blue, the radiation is being responded to by the organ, and this interaction of organ and field gives rise to direct sense consciousness. The direct perception of color may then be categorized under the concept "blue" within the mind sense consciousness.

At the level of direct sense perception, there's no conceptual mediation, so we don't say, "It's blue." There's just immediate mental and physical response to color. The organ, the field, and consciousness are all dependently coproduced, and seeing is dependently coproduced. There's nothing you can actually get ahold of called seeing, other than the interaction of these three. You can't get ahold of one of the three as separate from the others.

The next level of seeing is entirely mental. Here, the just deceased or just ended sense consciousness becomes an important condition for the arising of mind sense consciousness, *manovijnana.* The mind consciousness is born of the interaction of the mind organ and the field of mind objects, such as concepts, feelings, intentions, judgments, and emotions. The just deceased or just ended sense consciousness plays the role of mind organ (called manas). There are six sense consciousnesses—eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness and mind consciousness. Having just passed away, a sense consciousness, together with some mind object (for example, some concept of color, such as blue), become organ condition for the birth of mind consciousness. The interaction between mind consciousness, mind organ (the just deceased or just ended sense consciousness), and a mind object causes a conceptual cognition of color, where the concept of the color mediates the direct perception of the color.

Mind, or citta, in its all-embracing function, is just the total impression of all the mental factors and objects co-arising with it. In this sense, mind is receptive and impressionable. Imagine mind as a landscape of impressions of many things; the mind organ functions by separating the impression from all the things impressing upon it. It functions as a kind of carrier of a concept of duality between the impressed (consciousness) and the impresser (mental factors). This is why the mind organ may be considered to be the locus of duality, and why it is called the mind of defilement, *klista manas.*

To review, sense consciousness arises from a difference of some kind. Taking sound waves as an example, we have the organ, the ear, which is responsive. Sound waves touch, and eardrums respond. This ability to

respond is what we call the organ. There's a difference between these two kinds of materiality, and the interaction between them is a condition for the dependent co-arising of sense consciousness, which is the awareness and discrimination of the difference. Consciousness arises in dependence on difference, and we now have a discriminating consciousness that is essentially related to difference. The mental organ and mental objects are shadowy renditions of the physical organ and field. Through the interaction of mind consciousness, mind organ, and mind object, a mental version of the physical world dependently co-arises. This mind consciousness creates a difference at the mental level that replicates a difference at the physical level. When that happens, the mind has realized within itself the capacity of an organ. What does this mental organ do? It finds something to respond to. Since it is mental and extremely subtle, it can respond to all the mental objects. The totality of things it can respond to becomes its field. When these mental objects interact with the mind organ, this interaction becomes a condition that is traditionally called the door of arrival (*ayatana*) for the birth of the mind consciousness. This is a creation myth for mind consciousness, the story of its dependent co-arising.

The Sanskrit term for the capacity of the mind to act as an organ for itself is *manas.* Manas is the ability of the mind to reflect itself. The sense field for the mind organ manas is called *dharmadhatu.* Dharmadhatu is also the sphere of mind-objects for the mind-consciousness. Manas reflects things in the dharmadhatu one at a time. Things in the dharmadhatu are mental objects, and they all can be interpreted through concepts, reflected by manas, and known by mind consciousness, *manovijnana.* Manas, a deceased consciousness, is the past supporting the present, functioning in the present as an organ. Mind consciousness uses a past consciousness for its organ function, and in that relationship is a reflective capacity. With the aid of this reflective mind organ, manas, the mind consciousness is able to both directly cognize its objects and then, based on direct cognition, it is able to indirectly conceptually cognize its objects.

For example, we may directly experience anger and yet not clearly ascertain that we are angry. When anger arises, manas can turn toward the concept of the mental factor of anger and reflect it. Then the mind consciousness can grasp and know the concept of anger. So we can say, "I'm angry," or "I see anger," or "I see anger in someone else."

The Idea of Self

Manas is important in the dependent co-arising of this conventionally existing misconception of an independent self. In fact, manas is given the honor of being the locus of this limited mistaken understanding of self. This is the basis for its being promoted to the stature of the seventh consciousness by the Yogacara school of Buddhism. Although the Yogacarans drew much of their inspiration from the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra,* the sutra itself does not call it a seventh consciousness or explicitly state that it is the locus of the defiling imputation of an essential self upon the five aggregates of psycho-physical experience.

In any case, the sense of self, supported by the unconscious storehouse consciousness, is born and continues to be localized around this ability of consciousness to reflect itself. This sense of separate self and other is the basic problem of all human beings. It is born in association with the reflective capacity of the mind. Every time this reflecting capacity is active, the self is born again. It also involves the concept of substantial causal power. The sense of the substantial self is impressed upon and carried forth by the alaya vijnana. Alaya holds the material for the mind organ's reflections, and the mind organ's reflections are seen as a substantiated self. This substantial sense of self arises with the reflecting capacity of the mind and is laid back down onto alaya. Alaya then becomes the bed for further reflection and the re-creation of the illusion of a substantial self within active consciousness.

Karmic formations, themselves stored in alaya, predispose the manas to reflect one specific disposition from within alaya rather than reflecting alaya in general. Then, what is being reflected in active conscious awareness appears to be something independent and external, something outside of itself. Manas, the reflective capacity, the mind organ, is the locus of such defilement. This kind of thinking is always egocentric and defiled, always misconstruing its object as a substantial self. I picture this defiling manas as having two eyes. In every moment of unenlightened conscious life, it comes up, together with the alaya and one or more of the sense consciousnesses, with one eye looking at alaya, and the other eye reflecting on things among the objects of the sense consciousnesses. It thereby defiles and afflicts the coexisting sense consciousnesses. Things of alaya are not known; relative to active sense consciousness, they exist in obscure darkness.

This process draws on the effects of past thinking stored in alaya as seeds and uses them as support for present thinking. Our present thinking is surrounded by the darkness of our past thinking. Manas depends on that darkness and reflects it. In obscurity, all the seeds that are the storehouse consciousness are mistaken for substantial entities. Manas serves the function of a distorting mirror of the impressions and seeds of alaya so that the active consciousnesses can cognize the distorted appearances in the light. No matter what, the defiling manas always brings up self-pride, self-love, self-confusion, and self-view.[1] As long as the six active sense consciousnesses arise in association with this afflictive reflection, they themselves are also afflicted.

In conjunction with the organ function of mind, at some point in human history the idea of a self arose—the idea that there is something existing all by itself. That idea had a profound effect, but it was something very subtle, like a perfume left over from smelting iron. Where did it go? It went into the mind of darkness, the alaya, where the results of thinking are stored. The resultant cannot be a direct object of the active consciousnesses. But it can be reflected by manas and thereby made into an object for the evolving sense consciousnesses. The results of cognizing these distorted objects are laid back down onto alaya. This amassed sense of self gradually proliferates and becomes the seed and the cause for dispositions around self-perception. Again, whenever this process of perception and reflecting arises, it is accompanied by the four afflictions of self-pride, self-view, self-love, and self-ignorance. Then the mistaken perception of an independent self arises all over again, and its traces are once again laid down in alaya.

The Clearing in the Darkness

All around the triad of conditions for perceptual processes (the object, the organ, and the consciousness) are the seeds, or dispositions, that shape them. Although we call this background the storehouse consciousness, or alaya, it is not another thing. It doesn’t have an independent existence. It is part of the functioning of all the other consciousnesses. It is a boundless, dark world of dispositions in seed form supporting the world we see. We live in a world of conscious perceptions that are derived from direct sensory experience, grounded in alaya, fed by the effects of past action. Manas is associated with alaya developing and becoming darker, heavier, and more influential in our life. Our life is largely determined by this huge darkness around everything, by this unconscious.

You could picture your conscious life as a little circle of light surrounded by darkness. Until the afflictive manas has been abandoned, everything that comes up in the light of active consciousness is accompanied by the four afflictions of self and many other dispositions, too. What you experience never comes by itself. All you see is one object at a time, like a hand, or a pain, or pleasure, or enthusiasm, or some concept. But each object is supported and surrounded by a dark field of dispositions. You can't see them because they are not objects of active conscious awareness; they are in the dark. But they influence and condition whatever appears in the light of active consciousness.

D.H. Lawrence put it something like this: "This is what I know: the world of my conscious self is like a little clearing in the middle of a dark forest. Deities come out of the forest to visit now and then, and then they go back." Visitations from alaya are dispositions, but they also are deities in the sense of being indicators, showing you traces of the workings of the mind. They're almost like demons and devils, but they show you that there's more going on than this little world we live in.

Transforming the Alaya

Giving kind attention to the deities and demons requires us to be upright. On the one hand, being upright is a matter of ethical discipline, so we can cultivate positive dispositions in the alaya. If we follow the precepts and avoid killing, taking what is not offered, harmful speech, intoxication, and sexual misconduct, such practice "perfumes" alaya. Thus alaya is perfumed by the practice of the precepts. When we cultivate the wonderful qualities of the six perfections, *paramitas,* such as giving, patience, enthusiasm, concentration, and wisdom, the same thing happens. Thus alaya is transformed and purified. On the other hand, being upright is also a matter of upright sitting—sitting upright in the middle of the world we know. Lawrence also said something like, "I vow to have the courage to let them come and let them go back." If we can sit upright in this field of suffering, letting the deities of the subconscious come and go, then our stillness becomes the antidote to the greed, hate, and delusion that are the source of our torment.

Normally we have an idea of self and an idea of other. But as we become upright and purify the alaya, we can transform this dualistic thinking into pure awareness without erroneous imagining. In this transformed world, life is very simple and very basic. There's no belief in the substance of the

things that are known, no belief that they exist independently. The reason is that by practicing the six perfections manas has ceased to be a defiling manas. It just serves as the mind organ, making possible the arising of active mental sense consciousness.

You start by spending quite a bit of time sitting in the clearing and noticing that you feel a little funny, noticing that you are doing all kinds of weird things in the clearing. (I'm using the word *weird* etymologically, its Norse root meaning "fortune" or "destiny.") Little by little, you notice that the weird things you are doing have something to do with these visitors, and you start to say: "Look who's coming." You start to notice all the visitors, when they come and when they go back. After a while, they don't go back anymore; they just come, and they come, and they come. They are all welcomed in uprightness. You don't send anybody back. Eventually there isn't anyone out in the forest anymore. There are no more visitors. There is just sitting in the clearing, and that's all that is going on. This is how the storehouse consciousness is completely transformed.

Freud had the idea of making our life less miserable by bringing parts of the unconscious into the light. The Great Vehicle of the bodhisattva seeks the complete transformation of the unconscious by practicing the six perfections with all the beings and teachings that come into the light of active consciousness. The idea here is that you actually clean up the whole alaya, appease the whole field by sitting upright, kindly and calmly witnessing how all things come and go in conscious awareness. That happens for bodhisattvas on the supermundane path of Buddhist practice. The darkness of alaya is finally transformed into the perfect wisdom of the buddhas. It is transformed because bodhisattvas become so skillful at noticing the functioning of these ideas of self and other that they turn into light and lose their grip.

Being upright and still allows this transformation to occur. It might seem like a big job, but if you just sit still you have many, many occasions to learn. It is possible to make great progress if you work thoroughly and intensely, sitting in the middle of this process, studying with deep faith in the teaching of karmic cause and effect. Alaya is transformed into the bright mirror of wisdom. Manas turns from reflecting duality and becomes the wisdom of equality, and our life becomes quite simple.

But if these seeds, these dispositions, are unconscious, how are you going to notice them? By inference, by their effects and outflows. For example,

when self-confusion is in the dark, it agitates you. It causes a disturbance. It determines your actions. But if you can bring self-confusion in front of you, at that moment it is clear. Now, it isn't just self-confusion; it is our opportunity for practice. The more you bring examples or inferred examples of self-pride, self-confusion, self-love, and self-view into the light and then make the effort to appreciate how they dependently co-arise, the more the process of mind, thought, and consciousness is transformed. This is how a bodhisattva becomes wise with respect to mind, thought, and consciousness.

Selfless practice—being upright—makes impressions of selflessness in the unconscious and becomes seeds for the conscious practice of being upright. For me, as one who aspires to the bodhisattva way, this is a cardinal point of faith in practicing Zen meditation. This bodhisattva meditation is something totally useless from our individual point of view. Self-clinging wants to store all the stuff that is important to it, and it does. After all, it never knows when it may want to use it. But actually, when you put it away in some unknown place in the dark, it uses you. Zen meditation is not for you, not for your own pleasure, not for fun. Basically it is a pure ritual enactment of selflessness. It doesn't develop the unconscious; it transforms it into wisdom.

Meanwhile, alaya is unfolding the results of lifetime after lifetime after lifetime of doing things that were important for the self. That is what makes being unselfish so difficult. The unconscious results of being selfish are the support for the arising of everything unenlightened beings consciously know. Such results support thoughts like, "Aren't you a fool? Isn't this boring, doing a practice that is not giving you something? Aren't you afraid that the buddhas and ancestors are just using you? Aren't you falling into some weird Zen trap? One more body in the long lineage of buddhas and ancestors!" These kinds of thoughts arise in dependence on dispositions that are the results of past thoughts. They may run your life, but most of the time you don't even know they are there. They dispose you to turn away from selfless concern and toward self-concern. The results of past actions reign and rain.

We have one little thing we can do in the face of that, one little unselfish thing. Call it whatever you want. I call it being upright. It's being unselfish. It's action done for the welfare and happiness of others. It doesn't add or

take anything away. Eventually, however, it completely transforms the alaya and releases all the afflictions of self-concern.

Manas lives in conjunction with alaya. It functions in both the process of bondage and liberation. It works with alaya as they both become heavier and thicker, and it works with alaya when they are both unfolding and exhausting themselves. According to Vasubandhu, the manas is not found in the worthy one, nor in the state of cessation, nor on the supermundane path. So in arhatship and in higher-level bodhisattvas, alaya is completely transformed and liberated. Then there is just active consciousness that operates and perceives without self-clinging. It doesn't develop a new alaya because it has been liberated. The results of past action have been transformed into wise active consciousnesses.

When you enter the supermundane path of Buddhist meditation, the defiling manas (klista-manas) no longer functions, and you have changed from the self school to the no-self school. This is called a lineage change, *gotrabhu* in Sanskrit. *Gotra* means your lineage, your self-lineage, and *bhu* means "to end." You have cut the lineage of self-clinging; you don't believe in the existence of an independent self anymore. *Satkaya dristi* is the view that self has a substantial body. (*Satkaya* means "true body," "substantiality," or "self.") That view is dropped when you enter the supermundane path and start practicing upright sitting meditation without you doing it anymore. Then upright sitting does upright sitting. If you practice upright sitting thoroughly, you forget about yourself, and then it really is upright sitting. That is the supermundane path, and afflictive manas is no longer there. When the afflictive manas is not there, the unconscious store of past karma is eroding. The unconscious still supports active conscious awareness. But every time it does, it uses one of its chips, so to speak, and eventually it runs out of chips. Gradually your life is not just supported unconsciously; more and more, it is influenced and transformed by the practice of compassion for all beings who still believe in a substantial self.

At the site where Suzuki Roshi's ashes are interred, there stands a pole on which the Four Wisdoms are written. One of the wisdoms is Great Mirrorlike Wisdom, the wisdom of Dharmakaya Vairochana Buddha. It is the wisdom that sees everything in the universe as radiant buddha mind. But most of us don't see the radiance of mirrorlike wisdom. We see radiance with a film of self over it. Because of this film, objects seem to be solid.

They seem to have solid and independent existence, rather than just being ever-changing, radiant, interdependent appearances that are reflected and externalized by the mind. But this radiant dynamism is the way things really are.

When alaya evolves one way, being the result of past karma, dependent co-arising is obscured. When it unfolds the other way, through practicing the teachings, the truth of dependent co-arising is revealed and realized. Alaya is the base upon which defiling manas creates a sense of self and other over and over again in our lives. If we ever wake up and understand what alaya really is, alaya would become the great, bright mirror wisdom. A sense of self and other could still be created. But that self and other would be radiantly reflecting buddha's wisdom. That self and other would be a bright light to help all living beings realize that within alaya there is a profound and subtle understanding of the buddha's teaching of dependent co-arising.

The primary condition for transforming alaya and realizing buddha's wisdom is the study of the self. Usually we have to start this study from the deluded position of believing in an independently existing self. We may have to begin studying a self that we do not see as dependently co-arising. However, studying this self that we believe to be independently existing will eventually lead us to see the incoherence of such beliefs and to the revelation of the true nature of the self as nothing more than an insubstantial, dependent co-arising phenomenon. Within this revelation, alaya is transformed from darkness into light.

At the end of this chapter, the buddha tells us how wise bodhisattvas view their mind, thought, and consciousness. "Visalamati, those Bodhisattvas [wise in all ways] do not perceive their own internal appropriators; they also do not perceive an appropriating consciousness, but they are in accord with reality. They also do not perceive a basis, nor do they perceive a basis-consciousness. They do not perceive accumulations, nor do they perceive mind. They do not perceive an eye, nor do they perceive form, nor do they perceive an eye-consciousness. They do not perceive an ear, nor do they perceive a sound, nor do they perceive an ear-consciousness. They do not perceive a nose, nor do they perceive a smell, nor do they perceive a nose-consciousness. They do not perceive a tongue, nor do they perceive a taste, nor do they perceive a tongue consciousness. They do not perceive a body, nor do they perceive a tangible object, nor do

they perceive a bodily consciousness. Visalamati, these Bodhisattvas do not perceive their own particular thoughts, nor do they perceive phenomena, nor do they perceive a mental consciousness, but they are in accord with reality. These Bodhisattvas are said to be 'wise with respect to the ultimate.' The Tathagata designates Bodhisattvas who are wise with respect to the ultimate as also being 'wise with respect to the secrets of mind, thought, and consciousness.'" (77)

At first this may seem puzzling. After all, bodhisattvas do hear things, see things, and have thoughts. But in the context of emptiness, none of these things are perceived. As the *Heart Sutra* says, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no formations, and no consciousness. When you perceive emptiness, you don't perceive form. This is the way it is for bodhisattvas who meditate on the ultimate. In the context of the perception of emptiness, bodhisattvas do not find anything. The emptiness is about the emptiness of what you are perceiving, but you are not looking at what you are perceiving, you are looking at the emptiness of what you are perceiving. In the emptiness of what you are perceiving, you don't see the thing. Still, perception takes place, because emptiness is the emptiness of perceptions. So it is not the emptiness of nothing, it is the emptiness of certain forms of consciousness. In this text, the ungraspability of perception is the emptiness, and in that ungraspability you can't find any perceptions.

At the end of this passage, the buddha says that those who are wise with respect to the ultimate are also wise with respect to the secrets of mind, thought, and consciousness. In other words, those who are wise with respect to the ultimate are also wise with respect to the conventional.

This passage focuses on the ultimate. It is about purifying alaya by meditating on reality. Working with conscious material and seeing its emptiness purifies alaya, and the complete purification of alaya also requires practicing virtue with forms, feelings, impulses, consciousness, and perception (the five aggregates of psycho-physicality taught by buddha). But that doesn't purify alaya in the same way that seeing the emptiness of these things (including the emptiness of the practice of virtue itself) purifies alaya. So you can purify alaya both by meditating on emptiness and by meditating on the five aggregates. But when you realize emptiness, no aggregates are seen. When you meditate on the aggregates, you are not looking at emptiness, but hopefully you are practicing virtue with the aggregates. Eventually wisdom becomes fulfilled through those virtues, and

you can’t find the aggregates or the virtues anymore. But then you go back to practicing virtue again. In this way you develop both a store of wisdom and a store of virtue. You accumulate wisdom merit and virtue merit. You need both kinds of merit to purify and thoroughly transform alaya. When alaya is purified, in a sense there really isn’t any alaya anymore. When alaya is purified, it is turned into wisdom. Alaya, with all its dispositions, is subdued. It becomes quiescent. Thus bodhisattvas are wise with respect to the secrets of mind, thought, and consciousness.

chapter five

THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF PHENOMENA

CHAPTER 6 of the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* begins with a question by bodhisattva Gunakara, whose name means "root of virtue." "Bhagavan, when you say, 'Bodhisattvas are wise with respect to the character of phenomena,' . . . Bhagavan, just how are Bodhisattvas wise with respect to the character of phenomena?" (81) This great bodhisattva is asking the buddha, What is the wisdom of the bodhisattvas, how are they wise, and what are they wise about? Bodhisattvas are fundamentally beings of compassion. They are beings who wish to become buddhas because of their deep love for all beings. These compassionate beings want to develop buddha wisdom, so Gunakara asks the buddha exactly what it means for a bodhisattva to be wise about the nature of things, about the nature of phenomena.

The buddha replies: "Gunakara, you are involved in [asking] this in order to benefit many beings, to bring happiness to many beings, out of sympathy for the world, and for the sake of the welfare, benefit, and happiness of many beings, including gods and humans." (81) You might ask some questions in order to benefit one being: Where are the bandages for this person who has a cut? Where is the food for this hungry person? But Gunakara asks his question for the benefit of all. How could this abstract question lead to the benefit, welfare, and happiness of many beings? Because understanding the character of phenomena leads us to liberation from suffering. It frees us from being caught up in phenomena. People suffer because they cling to phenomena, and when they are wise with respect to phenomena, they pay attention to what is really happening, and there is no more clinging. This teaching focuses on phenomena that beings are not wise about. The buddhas and bodhisattvas want us to be wise with respect to the character of phenomena because beings who lack this wisdom suffer.

Because bodhisattvas are primarily concerned with the happiness of others, they want to understand the character of phenomena so they can help others to be wise and to melt away the root of their suffering. Beings who don't have compassion have trouble becoming wise, because the buddha's wisdom grows out of compassion. Without being kind to ourselves and to others, it is hard to develop this wisdom. Buddhas want

beings to be compassionate in order to be wise, and to be wise in order to help all beings everywhere.

The Three Natures of Phenomena

The first thing the buddha does to answer Gunakara's question is teach the nature of phenomena. In this sutra, he presents the nature of phenomena in a threefold way, although other very important sutras present the character of phenomena as twofold: a conventional character and an ultimate character. The *Heart of Perfect Wisdom Sutra,* for example, emphasizes the ultimate character of all phenomena: emptiness. The sutra teaches that all conventional phenomena, like forms and feelings, all have a single ultimate character. But in the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra,* emptiness is only one of three characters. Emptiness is called the thoroughly established character of phenomena, and the other two are called the other-dependent and the imputational characters of phenomena. We will see that in order to correctly understand emptiness as taught in the *Heart Sutra,* we must understand these two other characters, as well. To do this, the buddha begins by telling us what the three characters are. Then he gives some examples and describes how the different characters of phenomena are usually known. Finally, he tells us what happens once we really understand them.

The buddha tells Gunakara: "Your intention in questioning the Tathagata about this subject is good! It is good! Therefore, Gunakara, listen well and I will describe for you how [Bodhisattvas] are wise with respect to the character of phenomena. Gunakara, there are three characteristics of phenomena. What are these three? They are the imputational character, the other-dependent character, and the thoroughly established character." (81)

The buddha, wishing to demonstrate the actual nature of phenomena, tells us about these three characters: the imputational character, the other-dependent character, and the thoroughly established character. Then he goes on to describe each one: "Gunakara, what is the imputational character of phenomena? It is that which is imputed as a name or symbol in terms of the own-being or attributes of phenomena in order to subsequently designate any convention whatsoever." (81) The imputational character is something that is projected onto phenomena in order to be able to use conventional designations such as words. To impute means to put on top of, to superimpose. The root of the word *impute* means "to say." We feel a need to say something about phenomena in order to grasp them. In the storehouse consciousness, there is a deep unconscious propensity to make conventional

designations with regard to things. In order to talk about what is happening in our life, we must impute something to what's happening. And we do like to talk about our life; in fact, we have to. Even buddha has to talk about life in order to relate to sentient beings. It's part of the human condition. But in order to do that, we must impute something to our life. If we just sit upright with what's happening, without imputing anything to it, we can't talk about it.

Next, buddha tells us what it is that we impute or superimpose: essences and attributes. And how do we do that? We do it with words, symbols, and conceptual consciousness. We use our wonderful conceptual consciousness to impute imaginary things onto phenomena. We impute or superimpose an essence, an entity, an own-being. Phenomena are actually free of essences, own-beings, entities, and selves. But in order to talk about things, we cut up this amazing, ungraspable, inconceivable reality into little packages we can get ahold of. Then we bolster that projection by imputing essences and attributes on to the "things" we created. This imputational character is also called mere fantasy, because none of those essences, selves, or attributes really exist. The Sanskrit term for the imputational is *parikalpita,* which could be imaginatively translated as "complete, unsurpassed, perfect fantasy."

But the imputational character is just part of the story, one of its main characters. The buddha goes on to look at another main character, the other-dependent: "Gunakara, what is the other-dependent character of phenomena? It is simply the dependent origination of phenomena. It is like this: Because this exists, that arises; because this is produced, that is produced." (83) The other-dependent character of phenomena is the dependent co-origination of phenomena. This sutra uses the traditional way of explaining it, which is quite simple: Because this exists, that exists; because this arises, that arises; because this is produced, that is produced. That is the principle of dependent co-arising. In other words, what we are, what we experience, everything that is happening in our life depends on something other than itself. Everything is other-powered. I am powered by others. You are powered by others. Your life—your actual life, not your imaginary life—is other-dependent. In your imaginary life, you're in charge. But in fact we are dependent on others moment by moment by moment.

Every experience is other-powered. Tranquil contemplation of this fundamental teaching is the basic ongoing meditation of wisdom practice. Wisdom practice always keeps our eyes on dependent co-arising, which also means we pay attention to impermanence. Things that depend on others are impermanent because when the conditions supporting a phenomenon change, it changes too. When we practice, we pay attention to how things are happening, and how they happen is that they depend on things other than themselves. This in turn leads us to understand that all compounded things, like me and you and everybody we care about, are impermanent, unreliable, and other-dependent.

What is the way phenomena really are? Or in the words of the sutra, how are they thoroughly established? The buddha goes on to ask that question and to answer it: "Gunakara, what is the thoroughly established character of phenomena? It is the suchness of phenomena." (83) The way things are thoroughly established is the way they really are, and this way they really are is the suchness of phenomena—the ultimate truth. The thoroughly established character is the fact that our ideas and imputations about the way things are do not actually touch the way things really are. Things are free of our ideas and assumptions. Things are free of the imputations of essences and attributes that we make so that we can talk about what's happening

Not only are things not what we think they are, but they're free of what we think they are. The absence of what we think in what is happening is the way things actually are. If we meditate thoroughly on the absence of our imputations and superimpositions on what's happening, then all affliction is alleviated. We realize the various stages of the buddha way and become peacemakers in this world.

Another look at the original Sanskrit terms for the three natures can help us to get a clearer idea about these teachings. The first character is called parikalpita. It can be translated as "the imputational" or "the imputational nature." Parikalpita is the past participle of *parikalpa,* which means "imagination," and it can also be translated as "conceptual clinging," mere conceptual grasping, the characteristic pattern of clinging to what is entirely imagined, or simply "the imagined." The second character of phenomena is *paratantra. Para* means "other," and *tantra* in this case means "power," so it means other-powered, powered by another, or other-dependent. It is also translated as "dependent origination" or "the pattern of other-dependency."

The third character of phenomena is called *parinishpanna,* which can be translated as “the thoroughly established character,” “the perfected character of reality,” “the pattern of full perfection,” “the consummated character,” or “the consummated nature.”

During an intensive period of practice at Green Dragon Temple, one of the priests started calling the first character, parikalpita, the dream; the second character, paratantra, the mystery; and the third character, parinishpanna, the reality. I like those terms a lot, but my preference is to call them the dream, the mystery, and the absence of dreaming in the mystery.

These teachings show us that everything is basically a mystery—an ungraspable, inconceivable, inexhaustible mystery—until we start dreaming and superimpose our dream on the mystery. I am a mystery. You are a mystery. People are a mystery. It is actually very helpful in our daily life to remember that people are a mystery, to remember that people are always beyond what we think they are. The same is true of all the activities and objects we encounter. Whenever you are experiencing something—for example, sitting meditation—you have already grasped the word *sitting* and placed it on top of something vast, inconceivable, and ungraspable so that you can have the sitting. Suppose someone is sitting in front of you while you are meditating. Putting a word on him is the only way you can know him, but actually you are already experiencing him in a way you don’t know. He has an other-dependant character that you can’t see or identify except by superimposing a concept on him. You can’t actually see the other-dependent character of the person sitting in front of you because it is a mystery, and a mystery comprehended is not a mystery anymore.

All the different schools of Buddhism agree that phenomena are other-dependent, that they are created by conditions other than themselves. The teaching that because this exists, that arises, when this is produced, that is produced, is found in the oldest sutras. And this teaching goes on to say that, for example, when ignorance arises, there are karmic formations. It doesn’t say karmic formations make karmic formations happen. It says that based on ignorance, depending on ignorance, karmic formations arise. Based on karmic formations, dualistic consciousness arises, and so on. It doesn’t say that any one of those things makes itself. It says those things arise in dependence on something other than themselves.

The way things actually depend on something other than themselves, their other-dependent character, is very bright, dazzling, and wonderful. But our active consciousness, based on deep unconscious self-clinging, may find this brightness of the mysterious other-dependent character to be too much. So there may be recourse to the propensity to impute a little conceptual package so we can talk about it, so we can sell radiance at the corner grocery store.

As a way of meditating on the three characters, remind yourself that this person has a character that is mysterious to you. In other words, he has a character that is not known without this superimposition. Don't worry about losing your grasp on him, because your mind superimposes an essence on him anyway. Ultimately nothing is happening, because *happening* is just another word we put on things.

Each person we meet is a mystery. Each person we meet is ultimately unknown. But we usually don't accept that because we don't know how to deal with it. We have our handy little imputation machine, and we zap an imputation on top of whatever we meet. It's a nice little essence packaging the unknown, so we can talk to it, or about it, or with it. So we can grab it, or run away from it, because then we think we know which direction to run. If it is a mystery, we don't know where it is, and we don't know which way to turn. This is very inconvenient, very bewildering.

Let's take another example, such as a chair. A chair has an unpredictable, mysterious, other-dependent character, in other words it is other-powered. And the activity of sitting in a chair also has an other-dependent character. If you sit on a chair and assume it will support you, that assumption, that imputation, tires you. It drains you. If you sat in a chair without any expectation of what would happen, you would be studying the mystery. Maybe the chair will support you and maybe it won't. In studying the other-dependent character, you're ready for the chair to collapse, or fly through the air, or even support you. You're ready for everything, including the unknown. Then you're studying the other-dependent character of that activity. When you sit in chairs like that, or meet people like that, you don't get burned out. But when you meet people according to your idea of them, or you sit in a chair according to your idea of it, that will burn you out. Whatever idea you have of people or chairs, you must give it up. Then what could you do with the chair? You could study it. You could wonder about it.

You could experiment with it. You could verify that sitting on a chair is an opportunity for studying the other-dependent character of all phenomena.

A word of warning is necessary before you undertake this work, however. It is possible that if you believe that everything you look at is only a mystery, and if you see some harm being done to someone, you might say, "This is just another mystery. Let the harm be done, no problem." If that happens, then this meditation is not appropriate for you or for me. If you see yourself about to do something cruel, and you think, "Oh well, what I'm planning is really beyond my thought that it's cruel, so it doesn't matter if I do it," you are making a serious mistake in your understanding of the meditation.

The correct practice of this meditation makes us more rather than less careful of and gentle with others, and at the same time it relieves us of excessive self-concern. And that's usually good, because generally speaking we're overly concerned with our own welfare and not concerned enough with the welfare and protection of others. If you do this meditation, it won't remove your concern for the welfare and protection of beings; it will help you to treat them with equanimity. You'll want to protect all beings and treat all beings equally, those who are rude to you as well as those who are sweet to you. This meditation makes you more humble in the face of the awesome reality of beings, and it will help you realize that everything matters because it is part of this great, awesome, ungraspable, inconceivable mystery of the other-dependent character.

The Buddha's Similes

The buddha gives several similes to help us understand the three natures. "Gunakara, for example, the imputational character should be viewed as being like the defects of clouded vision in the eyes of a person with clouded vision. Gunakara, for example, the other-dependent character should be viewed as being like the appearance of the manifestations of clouded vision in that very [person], manifestations which appear as a net of hairs, or as insects, or as sesame seeds; or as a blue manifestation, or a yellow manifestation, or a red manifestation, or a white manifestation." (83)

Buddha says that the imputational character, that pattern of consciousness whereby we impute a self to things and then cling to them, is like the defects of clouded vision in the eyes of a person with cataracts. The other-dependent character is like the way things appear to someone whose vision is clouded. The manifestations may appear to be a net of hairs, or insects, or

sesame seeds, or for that matter just about anything else. The way we perceive things is defective because we lay essences on them in order to make conventional designations. Then things look like something independent and separate. But everything really has an other-dependent character, even if it doesn't look that way. If something doesn't arise by dependent co-origination, it doesn't exist.

It is as if you have fuzz in your eyes, and you look at the world and think you see a net of hairs or a swarm of insects. It's very difficult, but if you could look at nothing at all with clouded vision, you would realize, Oh, those are just lines in my eyes; those are just specks in my eyes. In Joseph Heller's novel *Catch* 22, there is a character who says he has flies in his eyes. He uses this to explain his mistakes and misbehaviors. But when you have clouded vision and you look out at the world, you see flies all over the place. You are actually looking at something, but with clouded vision it doesn't appear the way it really is. This clouded vision is based on the other-dependent character, but it is distorted by being mistaken as the imputational character.

In other words, the other-dependent, the way things are actually happening, manifests in our life as a false appearance. Or putting it more positively, the other-dependent is really here as these appearances, but the appearances are not the way they would be without the superimposition. The other-dependent looks like a swarm of insects, because you have these specks in your eyes. But actually the other-dependent doesn't have specks all over it. It isn't really insects, but it is something. Sometimes you can say, "Bring me the insects," and people will bring you insects. In other words, you can use the imputations to get things done. The real problem here is not the correspondence or lack of correspondence between the word *insect* and some other-dependent phenomenon. The problem is the superimposition onto the world of an essence that is not there. Such a projection is what makes us hate insects or love insects, because we are confused about insects. The insects do not really have the self we project on them. There is nothing about the insects that justifies the word *insect* being applied to them.

Finally, the buddha goes on to the thoroughly established character. "Gunakara, for example, the thoroughly established character should be viewed as being like the unerring objective reference, the natural objective reference of the eyes when that person's eyes have become pure and free

from the defects of clouded vision." (83) We should look at the thoroughly established as being like what the eyes see when the defects of vision are gone. We see reality when we see the absence of the imputational character in the other-dependent character—the complete absence of our dreaming in the mystery of the way things are.

The buddha also uses a clear crystal as an example. He tells the bodhisattva Gunakara: "When a very clear crystal comes in contact with the color blue, it then appears as a precious gem, such as a sapphire or a mahanila. Further, by mistaking it for a precious gem such as a sapphire or a mahanila, sentient beings are deluded." The buddha goes on to say that when the clear crystal come into contact with the color red, it appears as a ruby, and near the color green it appears as an emerald. Then he tells Gunakara that "you should see that in the same way as a very clear crystal comes in contact with a color, the other-dependent character comes in contact with the predispositions for conventional designations that are the imputational character. For example, in the same way as a very clear crystal is mistaken for a precious substance such as a sapphire, a mahanila, a ruby, an emerald, or gold, see how the other-dependent character is apprehended as the imputational character." (85)

So the other-dependent is like a very clear crystal. But you have colors in your mind that you impute to the crystal, and when you impute color to the crystal, it looks like something else. If you impute red to the crystal, the crystal might look like a ruby. There is no ruby there, but you can't see the clear crystal that is there because of the red in your eyes. You have red in your eyes, or at least in your mind, and when the red is applied to the clear crystal, you see something that is not there, something you call a ruby. What is really there is almost impossible to sense. You can barely see it, because it is very, very clear. The other-dependent character is like that. It is very, very clear, very, very bright. Then we overlay it with something that makes it easy to see. It appears to be this nice, visible thing that we impute to it, and then we can talk about it with our friends.

It is like putting a piece of red cloth under a clear crystal and then thinking the crystal is a ruby. The red cloth in this example is the idea of an essence, the idea that things exist on their own. When you apply that idea to something, it looks different. There seems to be something there that wasn't there before, something that really doesn't exist, something that looks like a ruby.

Where does the red cloth, this imagination of self, come from? The imagination of a self is a dependently co-arisen phenomenon, just as a red cloth is a dependently co-arisen phenomenon. But while the imagining of a self is dependently co-arisen, the self that is being imagined is not. It doesn't exist at all. When we superimpose a self upon things, we see them differently. They appear to be out there on their own. And when we believe that, we suffer. The cloth is a dependently co-arisen phenomenon, and when we put it under the clear crystal, which is also dependently co-arisen, there is the appearance of something that isn't really there. But the trick and the complexity of this process is that it is easier to talk about things when they appear in that false way.

If you look carefully, I think you will find that when you talk about things, your mind makes this superimposition. It puts this self on things and makes them look solid and independent. For example, when people say things that we don't agree with, we don't tend to see it as just playful words being voiced. It is as though something important that needs to be protected, like a self, is getting tampered with. Because your view of things is challenged, you start feeling anxious. Things are starting to change, and self-view doesn't go with change. Self-view is fixed, permanent, rigid, and afflicted.

As you start to see how changeable things really are, this seemingly fixed self-pattern starts to break up. Opening up to change, you start relating to things more appropriately. Putting a self on things contradicts change; opening up to this delusion and hearing the teaching of the clear crystal of the other-dependent opens you up to change. Remembering that everything has a mysterious, changeable quality is a meditation that balances our mistaken view of things as permanent and independent.

The buddha goes on to tell bodhisattva Gunakara: "For example, a clear crystal is not thoroughly established in permanent, permanent time or in everlasting, everlasting time as having the character of a precious substance like a sapphire, a mahanila, a ruby, an emerald, or gold, and is without the natures [of such things]. In the same way, you should see that since the other-dependent character is not thoroughly established in permanent, permanent time, or in everlasting, everlasting time as being the imputational character, and is without its nature, it is the thoroughly established character." (85–87) Despite what our imputations tell us, nothing has any permanent fixed nature, any self. Everything is thoroughly established as

being selfless. The other-dependent character when it is selfless is the thoroughly established character.

There may seem to be a contradiction between the teachings in these two examples. In the first example, the other-dependent character is compared to the clouded vision of someone with cataracts, but in the second example, it is like a very clear crystal. It may appear that the other-dependent is defiled in the first example but pure in the second. In the first example, we have a description of the other-dependent that is confused with the imputational character. The second example has two parts. First, the other-dependent is described prior to confusion with the imputational character as a clear crystal. In the second part, the other-dependent character is confused with the imputational character and manifests as false appearances such as a ruby, an emerald, and so on. The clear crystal example explains how the other-dependent character is open to being influenced and obscured by impositions and conceptual clinging and is therefore the basis for false appearances and misunderstandings.

These teachings are hard to understand. They challenge our most basic way of looking at things. If you are having trouble, start at the beginning; start with what you are experiencing right now. The text tells us that what you are experiencing is like a very clear crystal. In fact, all things are like a very clear crystal. And as soon as an other-dependent experience arises, we simultaneously project essence on it, and the imputational character is there.

The Origins of the Imputations

Some people are curious about how this tendency to make conceptual overlays began. I can tell a story about it, but as I tell the story, realize that this story is also a conceptual overlay on the actual process by which the imputations arose. It is a story about how the imputations arose, rather then the way they really arose, which no words can reach. The story is that these defects of vision arise from past situations, for example, of human beings putting words on things. Because humans have been playing with words and matching them to objects for a long, long time, that karmic activity has created a tendency to impute some essence or basis to things that words can be fixed to. Because of the history of human evolution, of matching words to objects, our mind is already structured in such a way that we do this from birth. And through this process the self is born. This is a history that we can impute to the development of the habit of self-imputation.

Because of past karma based on a belief in a self, we now automatically project independent existence onto all phenomena. With the birth of sense consciousness, we begin projecting an appearance of things existing on their own. Nonhuman beings also do a similar projection but without the ability to fix words onto these objects. It is not clear how well developed this projection of separateness is in different animals, but it is very strong in humans, and it is there from the beginning of life. This projection is preverbal, but it sets up the potential for language. Once we project this essence onto things, we can use words to talk about them. But we believe that the things we project really exist, and that is the source of suffering. And once we are suffering, it is difficult to relate to things in a skillful way. Even when we have some understanding that our suffering is caused by our misconception of things, it is hard to practice mindfulness of this in the midst of our afflictions.

Knowing the Three Characters

After giving us the examples of the delusion caused by clouded vision and the mixture of the clear crystal with a color, the sutra tells us how we know the different characters of phenomena: "Gunakara, in dependence upon names that are connected with signs, the imputational character is known. In dependence upon strongly adhering to the other-dependent character as being the imputational character, the other-dependent character is known. In dependence upon absence of strong adherence to the other-dependent character as being the imputational character, the thoroughly established character is known." (87) The other-dependent character is known by adhering to it as being something that it is not. It is known through the conceptual clinging superimposed upon it. The thoroughly established character is known in the absence of strong adherence to the other-dependent character as being the imputational. When there is an absence of adhering to the other-dependent as being superimposed concepts—or when we actually meditate on that absence—we know the thoroughly established character. When we give up clinging to the superimposition as being the other-dependent character, we open to the ultimate truth.

The identity of whatever is dependently co-arisen is verbally established. In other words, that identity is nothing more than a word. Apart from a conventional designation and the superimposition of false existence that makes it possible, the thing itself has no identity. The identity is not known, not established in experience. To say that the identity of a thing is merely a

verbal fact is to say that it is empty. Without the thing being a referent of the word, the thing has no identity. Without the imputational, without the superimposition of a false status upon the thing, the conventional way a thing exists is not possible. We can't find it, but that doesn't mean there is nothing there. It is just that it has no identity, and so, for us, it is not established. When we look deeply, we realize that the conventional world cannot be found. We can't actually find anything; we can only find a superimposition.

Once when I was first meditating, I looked down at my foot, and I realized I could see what was under the skin. I could see the muscles and bones, but I was seeing them through my skin. If I peeled the skin off my foot, the muscles and bones would look different. The way that the muscles and bones are is not the way they look through the skin, but you can still see them through the skin. As a matter of fact, that's the way you like to see them. So you can actually see the way things are through your imagination of ways that they aren't. The way they are is not totally unrelated to the way we imagine they are, because our imagination is made with respect to the way they are. That way we can talk about them, and that's useful.

When you see people doing a thing called making lunch, you may superimpose an essence on what you are seeing so you can make a conventional designation such as "May I please have lunch?" But this superimposition is not really there at all. In order to speak, we have to confuse phenomena with essences. That's the price of speech.

When highly evolved practitioners who have realized the ungraspable nature of reality return to speech in order to guide other beings, they willingly pay the price of admission to conventional speech, which is some confusion of the imputational with the other-dependent. In other words, there is a mystery here. We have the mysterious, ungraspable, inconceivable way things are happening, and if we want to talk about it, we have to use our minds to project something to make it graspable. We need to project essences and attributes on the mystery in order to locate it and speak about it. This projection is the platform for our words and designations. The price of speaking with each other is holding on to the mystery of what's happening as our imputations. That's why we eventually have to give up talking for a little while and just sit and open to the buddha's teaching.

Phenomena of Afflicted Character

Buddha goes on to explain that “when Bodhisattvas know the imputational character as it really is with respect to the other-dependent character of phenomena, then they know characterless phenomena as they really are. Gunakara, when Bodhisattvas know the other-dependent character as it really is, then they know the phenomena of afflicted character as they really are.” (87)

Attention: The following two paragraphs form a great koan. Opening to their truth calls for great concentration.

“Gunakara, when Bodhisattvas know the thoroughly established character as it really is, then they know the phenomena of purified character as they really are. Gunakara, when Bodhisattvas know characterless phenomena as they really are with respect to the other-dependent character, then they completely abandon phenomena of afflicted character. When they have completely abandoned phenomena of afflicted character, they realize phenomena of purified character.

“Therefore, Gunakara, Bodhisattvas know the imputational character of phenomena, the other-dependent character, and the thoroughly established character of phenomena as they really are. Once they know characterlessness, the thoroughly afflicted character, and the purified character as they really are, then they know characterless phenomena as they really are. They completely abandon the phenomena of afflicted character, and when they have completely abandoned phenomena of afflicted character, then they realize phenomena of purified character.” (89)

When bodhisattvas know the imputational character as it really is, they know the characterlessness of phenomena. When you know the imputational character, you know that phenomena lack an essence, a distinctive character, because the character you see is entirely dependent on words and symbols. The character things have is imputed to them and does not come to exist by way of their own intrinsic nature. When you see the way the imputational really is, you see that phenomena actually are characterless, that they lack an essence of character. Then you understand the characterlessness of phenomena.

When you know the other-dependent, you know our affliction. You understand that things have an other-dependent character, but they are afflicted by this superimposition. Or put differently, you are afflicted in your view of things because of this superimposition. When you know the other-dependent character as it really is, you know the afflicted character of

phenomena as it really is. As we have seen, the way you conventionally know the other-dependent character is by taking it as what is imputed to it. So part of this process is realizing that the other-dependent is not what it is imputed to be. What is imputed is not really in it; it is just imagined on top of it. This imputation does happen, but it doesn't really register in the other-dependent. When you understand that, you understand the nature of affliction.

When you know the thoroughly established character as it really is, you know the purified character of phenomena. When you know the thoroughly established character, you understand how the other-dependent character actually is free of any superimposition. And when you understand that, you understand the purified character or the purifying potential of all phenomena. So when you understand the imputational, you understand that it really doesn't have a character. What is imputed is not really there. When you understand the other-dependent, you understand that the way we know it is through the imputational and that is the way we are afflicted. And when you understand the thoroughly established, you understand the way that purifies this process and removes our afflictions.

Getting Lunch

Let's look at the example of lunch again, this time in terms of afflictions. Suppose you ask your friends, "Could I have lunch now?" and they bring you lunch. It works. But it also cuts you off from the reality of lunch, and this is affliction. It works because you are dealing with lunch in very limiting terms, in terms of your projection of it existing out there on its own. Then you can be really greedy about lunch or hate the lunch. You might think it is a lousy lunch, rather than, "This is a mystery. This is radiance." If for some reason you think, "This is a lousy lunch," the other-dependent character of the lunch suddenly turns into an afflictive phenomenon, because you adhere to it as being a lousy lunch, and you can't stand it. The same goes for a good lunch. You get greedy, or you might get very angry if someone tries to take your lunch away.

Once I was on an airplane going to give a Buddhist retreat, and my assistant had ordered a low-fat lunch for me. When they brought the lunches, they gave the woman across the aisle a low-fat lunch, and I thought, Mmm, she's getting a low-fat lunch, too. But then they didn't give me a low-fat lunch. They gave me a high-fat lunch. Sometimes I don't mind those high-fat lunches that much, but this was a high-fat lunch that almost

no one in the airplane wanted to eat. Even the people who love fat were offering me their lunches. “Hey, you look hungry, do you want this?” This high-fat lunch was a mystery. It was so bad, you almost couldn’t even define it. They said it was a hamburger, but almost no one was sure that this was a hamburger. It was like a bodhisattva had manifested on the airplane to push everybody to meditate on the other-dependent.

Across the aisle was a very simple low-fat lunch, and it looked delicious and really healthy. The lady didn’t say, “I didn’t order this lovely lunch, give me one of those unbelievably obnoxious high-fat ones.” She sat there and ate it. I told the attendant, “I ordered a low-fat lunch,” and he said, “Yeah, so what?” or something like that. So I sat there and watched that lady eat my lunch. Or I should say, eat her lunch, that delicious low-fat lunch. But what if I had tried to get my lunch from her? What if I had said, “That is my lunch,” or “You can have it, but it is my lunch. Enjoy it!” Then afflictive emotions of greed, hate, and delusion would arise from this misconception being applied to things. Without the superimposition of an imputation on other-dependent phenomena, greed, hate, and delusion do not arise. Other emotions, like diligence and mindfulness, arise instead. More and more skillful behavior arises as we loosen the belief in a self or an essence that is being put on things. Things still look like they have an essence, but we train ourselves to hear the teaching that things actually have a character that is beyond the self that we are projecting onto them and onto ourselves.

In the belief in the separation between ourselves and the low-fat lunch across the aisle, the afflictive emotions arise, and from them unskillful behaviors are born. When we act out these emotions, they cause more suffering, and they create more opportunities for the projection of self and more opportunities for believing it.

Every phenomenon has the basic nature that it dependently co-arises. Everything that exists has this nature, and this nature is beyond what we think it is. It is beyond the way we see it. When we see something, we interpret the way it appears with our thinking. When we hear something, we interpret it with our thinking. When we taste something, we interpret it with our thinking. And after we think it, we interpret it with our thinking again. So you might remember that everything is beyond your seeing, beyond your hearing, beyond your thinking, beyond your feeling. But in some ways, it might be easier for you to feel how it is beyond your thinking, or to imagine

how it is beyond your tasting, rather then to taste how it is beyond your tasting. Be creative. Open to the creative possibilities of what is happening. That is a way to get ready for further study in this process of becoming wise about the character of phenomena, like a great bodhisattva.

Saying it's a lousy lunch and then thinking there is something about the lunch that actually is lousy is what causes our affliction. Check it out: when you say "lousy lunch," do you think there is actually something about the lunch that justifies the word *lousy,* or do you think you just use the word *lousy* to refer to the thing? If you study it, you will probably find that you have put a self on the lunch, and that you imagine that there is something in the lunch that the expression "lousy lunch" refers to. But even while you experience the affliction caused by that projection, you can simultaneously hear this teaching.

This teaching is about the other-dependent, and we have been told that when you know the other-dependent, you know the afflicted character. Part of the study of the other-dependent is to come to understand that things are really beyond our ideas, and because we grasp them as having a self that corresponds to our ideas, there is a process of affliction. We don't have to liberate ourselves from those afflictions before we can understand the other-dependent character, because part of learning about the other-dependent character is seeing that it is the basis of those very afflictions.

If you are meditating in such a way that you understand characterless phenomena, then you understand afflicted phenomena and purified phenomena. Then you can go to lunch and say, "This is a lousy lunch" without believing it as really characterizing the lunch. You know you are talking about yourself and your relationship to things. But you probably wouldn't talk that way anymore. You would be more likely to say something like "I am grateful to be here with you and have lunch." And you probably wouldn't go around thinking, "This is a lousy lunch." You might think it is a lunch, but you would also understand that any imputation of self to this lunch is a characterless illusion. You could understand this and still call it lunch. A buddha can say "lunchtime" without projecting, without believing the self of the lunch. A buddha might even make a joke, saying "lousy lunchtime" or "delicious lunch" as an invitation to play.

If I know the imputation of "lousy lunch" with respect to lunch, I know characterless phenomena as they really are. If I am served lunch, call it a lousy lunch, and catch myself believing that it really is a lousy lunch, then I

know the afflictive character of lunch. Enlightened people are wise with respect to the character of phenomena in this way. If they eat their lunch or if they don't, they understand that the imputation of "lousy lunch" is characterless. Therefore they understand the afflictive nature of phenomena. They understand that if they thought there was a character that was an essence corresponding to "lousy lunch," then that would be an affliction of the lunch experience. Because they understand that, they abandon the afflictive character of lunch.

Because they know the afflicted character as it really is, they are not caught. They don't confuse the projection of a lousy lunch with reality. Bodhisattvas realize both that this projection is characterless and that there is constant production of projections that fail to exist. They know that if they were to see a projection as having an essence, that would be an affliction. So they abandon the afflictive character of lunch and thereby realize the purified character of lunch; they understand the characterless nature of the character of lunch. Thus we have a bodhisattva who is wise with respect to the phenomenon of lunch. We have a wisdom lunch. If we don't have wisdom, then whether we eat lunch or not, we have suffering. And without wisdom, we don't fully nurture the welfare, happiness, and benefit of all beings. So the bodhisattva has to have another lunch and see if she can practice the teachings until there is wisdom at the lunch.

Understanding These Teachings

These great teachings are difficult to understand because they run directly against the way we usually see the world. One way to approach them is to confess that you really don't believe in the teachings. You might notice, for example, that you really don't think people are contributing to your existence—in other words, that you disagree with the teachings of the other-dependent character of phenomena in the case of you. Other people may be other-dependent, but not me. I believe that I am in control of things. I can control my life; I can put on my shoes. But is a child in control of his shoes? You have to help him, and he knows that. Sometimes he might say, "Help me put my shoe on." And you help him, and he gets his shoe on. Then at some point he says, "Let me do it." And he thinks he put his shoe on by himself, even though you helped him with his shoe hundreds of times, and he wouldn't have been able to put it on this time without that. And you helped him in countless other ways such that he's alive, and he can think, "I'm going to put my shoe on by myself." After that, he thinks he

puts his shoes on by his own power. He ignores the millions of times, the millions of ways, the inconceivable ways, he was helped to put on his shoes.

None of us will ever know all the ways we were helped to put our shoes on. We can't. It's a mystery how we get our shoes on. We think it isn't a mystery; we think we know how we get our shoes on. But when we know how we get our shoes on, that means, according to this teaching, that we projected some essences and attributes onto the situation so we can feel like our shoes are under our control. But putting on a shoe is really a mystery.

Ignoring the mystery and believing we do things by ourselves alone is the source of nonvirtue. When we switch from nonvirtuous deeds to virtue, we are switching from deeds based on the misconception of an independent self to deeds that arise from the appreciation that what's happening is dependent on others. We switch to a more mysterious and ungraspable approach to our shoes.

Burnout happens as a result of repeated actions based on a feeling of self-control or self-power. Every time you put on a shoe and ignore this teaching, every time you think that you put on the shoe by your own power, you get jacked around, disturbed, and agitated. Your energy is blocked and distorted every time you put on a shoe thinking that you are doing it by your own power. And if you put your shoes on like that all day long, at the end of the day you might feel like running barefoot to someplace where there are no shoes.

So this is how bodhisattvas are wise with respect to the character of phenomena. They hear about the three kinds of character from the buddha —the imputational, the other-dependent, and the thoroughly established— and then they study them. And when they know each one, they know that the first character is characterless, the second character is afflicted, and the third character is purified or purifying. When they understand the first character, they abandon the afflictive character of the second one and realize the purified or purifying character that is the third one. That is how bodhisattvas are wise, and that is how beings become free of suffering through wisdom.

It is not unusual for people to have doubts about these teachings. As a matter of fact, it's a normal part of the process of learning. By revealing and disclosing your lack of faith in the teaching that you are an other-dependent phenomenon, you will eventually melt away the root of your doubt and

your resistance to the teaching. Once you become intimate with other-dependent phenomena, you can study more clearly how you impute characteristics to them. The more you understand how you impute things, the more you see that actually it's just a fantasy. And when you see the absence of that fantasy, you are looking at suchness itself.

chapter six

THE LACK OF OWN-BEING OF PHENOMENA

AFTER TELLING US about the three characteristics of phenomena in the previous chapter, the buddha goes on to explain the three ways phenomena lack own-being, or essence. This is a much longer chapter and is deeper and more difficult. Like the other chapters, a bodhisattva is questioning the buddha. His name is Paramarthasamudgata. *Paramartha* is "ultimate truth," and *samudgata* means "arisen" or "born from," so his name is "arisen from ultimate truth."

This bodhisattva starts by giving a long list of the things that buddha seemed to have taught to have own-character, or own-being. For example, Paramarthasamudgata says: "The Bhagavan has spoken in many ways of the own-character of the aggregates and further spoken of their character of production, their character of disintegration, and their abandonment and realization. Just as he has spoken of the aggregates, he has also spoken of the sense spheres, dependent origination, and the sustenances.

"The Bhagavan has also spoken in many ways of the [own-] character of the [four] truths and further spoken of the realization [of suffering], abandonment [of the source of suffering], actualization [of the cessation of suffering], and meditative cultivation [of the path]." (95)

But then Paramarthasamudgata goes on to point out that the buddha also taught "that all phenomena lack own-being; that all phenomena are unproduced, unceasing, quiescent from the start, and naturally in a state of nirvana." So Paramarthasamudgata wants to know, "Of what was the Bhagavan thinking when he said, 'All phenomena lack own-being; all phenomena are unproduced, unceasing, quiescent from the start, and naturally in a state of nirvana?'" (97)

Buddha first talks about the character of all phenomena, and then he says that all phenomena lack their own character. There seems to be a contradiction. So Paramarthasamudgata asks, What were you thinking when you taught that all phenomena lacked own-being after teaching about the own-character of all phenomena? In other words, what did he have in mind when he taught the Prajna Paramita literature? In the *Heart Sutra,* for example, it says that the five aggregates that make up human experience lack own-being, that all the aggregates are empty. But earlier the buddha seemed to have taught that the aggregates do have own-being. So

Paramarthasamudgata is asking, How come you say that aggregates don't have own-being, when earlier you taught that they did?

Notice that bodhisattva Paramarthasamudgata doesn't ask him why he taught the own-character of phenomena first. Rather, he asks him, Why did you teach differently later? Of course, that also implies the question: Why did you teach differently at the beginning? And the answer I would give is that if the buddha had taught the ultimate truth at the beginning of his teaching, his students probably would have had a very distorted and unhealthy interpretation of Buddhist practice and Buddhist teaching. So he gave them a provisional teaching on the nature of reality. What he gave them was a teaching that allowed them to dismantle their belief in the self of the person but continue to believe in the self of phenomena, like the aggregates. In that way, they wouldn't say, "Well, everything is empty, so nothing matters. People are empty of self, and the precepts are empty of self, too, so forget the precepts." He knew the precepts were an essential foundation for the whole path. So he taught a way that would encourage people to continue to practice meditation and follow the precepts while they gradually give up their belief in the imputations of self they project on people. Then later, when people were ready, he was able to teach them that all phenomena are empty, even the teachings. That's why he gave the other teaching first, even though it was actually false, in a way. The second teaching was really true, but it was easily misunderstood. Then the third teaching was given to protect us from that misunderstanding, and to help us see the way our tendency to make conventional designations and imputations shapes our perception of phenomena.

As he does in the previous chapters, the buddha responds by praising the questioner for his wonderful motivation. After all, he is the bodhisattva "arisen from ultimate truth," and he probably knows the answer already, so he isn't asking this question for himself, but for the benefit of all beings everywhere. "Paramarthasamudgata, your thought, virtuously arisen, is good! It is good! Paramarthasamudgata, you are involved [in asking] this in order to benefit many beings, to bring happiness to many beings, out of sympathy for the world, and for the sake of the welfare, benefit, and happiness of beings, including gods and humans. Your intention in questioning the Tathagata about this subject is good!" (97–99)

The Three Types of Lack of Own-Being

Then the buddha says something like: “Well, actually in the back of my mind when I taught that one kind of lack of own-being, I was thinking of three kinds of lack of own-being. And the three types of lack of own-being that I was thinking about were a lack of own-being in terms of character, a lack of own-being in terms of production, and an ultimate lack of own-being. That’s why I taught that all phenomena lack own-being.”

But notice that his answer is not so much about why he taught in this new way but what his deeper intention was when he was teaching that everything is characterless and lacks own-being. And what he had in mind was three types of lack of own-being that were never mentioned before this sutra. Those three types of lack of own-being are the other shoe dropping relative to the three characters taught in the previous chapter. As we will see, the three characters are actually the three types of lack of own-being, as well. They are characters, but they are also three different modes of lacking own-being.

Next, the buddha goes on to look at each of the three types of lack of own-being, one after the other. “Paramarthasamudgata, what is the lack of own-being in terms of character of phenomena? It is the imputational character. Why is this? The [imputational character] is a character posited as names and symbols, but it does not subsist by way of its own character. Therefore, it is the ‘lack of own-being in terms of character.’” (99) So the character lack of own-being is the imputational character of phenomena—the way that the imputations you make lack own-being. They are just empty imaginings, fantasy, a dream. The sutra calls them a “sky flower,” which of course is something that appears to exist but actually doesn’t. Our imputations have no real substance, and nothing about them has any independent reality.

Then the buddha turns to the production lack of own-being. “Paramarthasamudgata, what is the lack of own-being in terms of production of phenomena? It is the other-dependent character of phenomena. Why is this? The [other-dependent character] arises through the force of other conditions and not by itself. Therefore, it is the ‘lack of own-being in terms of production.’” (99) What is production? Production means arising or birth. The way they happen doesn’t have a self, and what’s happening is not produced by itself. So you can look at it both ways. All things are other-produced. The other upon which things depend is also other-dependent, and it too lacks own-being.

This lack of own-being in terms of production is the other-dependent character of phenomena. Nothing is produced by itself; thus, everything has a self-production lack of own-being. You are not produced by yourself. Your practice is not produced by itself. Your body is not produced by itself. We are other-dependent phenomena. We are dependently co-arising phenomena. We therefore have a lack of own-being in terms of production.

One of the difficult aspects of the sutra is that the other-dependent is actually two kinds of lack of own-being. In the buddha's words: "Phenomena that are dependently originated lack an own-being due to the lack of own-being in terms of production. They also lack own-being due to an ultimate lack of own-being. Why is this? Paramarthasamudgata, I teach that whatever is an object of observation for purification of phenomena is the ultimate. Since the other-dependent character is not an object of observation for purification, it is an 'ultimate lack of own-being.'" (99–101) The other-dependent character, what we have called the mystery, lacks an essence in terms of its production, but it also has an ultimate lack of own-being, or essence. But it is not the same ultimate lack of own-being as the thoroughly established. Thus, there are two types of ultimate lack of own-being. One type is the actual ultimate lack of own-being, which is the selflessness, the emptiness, of phenomena. The other type of ultimate lack of own-being is the lack of being the ultimate itself. It is the lack of being the object for purifying phenomena. So one ultimate lack of own-being is selflessness itself, which is the thoroughly established. But there is another type of ultimate lack of own-being, which is the mystery—the other-dependent character of phenomena—that is the very absence of the other type of ultimate lack of own-being. Not only is form emptiness, but form is the lack of emptiness. Not only is emptiness form, but emptiness is the absence of form.

I've often wondered what the buddha was thinking of when he taught these two types of ultimate lack of own-being. How can there be two true ultimate lacks of own-being? Well, there really aren't. Why did he say there were? I think it is because the other-dependent and the thoroughly established are so intimate that he felt that he had to use these two types of own-being to help us distinguish their relationship correctly. The problem is that there is a tendency, which has come up many times among my students, to think that once there is no more confusion of our thinking with the other-dependent, then the other-dependent is the ultimate. That's why the buddha

called it an ultimate lack of own-being, because the other-dependent actually lacks being the ultimate truth. It is mentioned specifically because there is a tendency to look for the thoroughly established in the other-dependent, in the mystery, as though the essence of the mystery is the thoroughly established. But they're actually not the same. The other-dependent lacks the ultimate lack. This is a core issue of this chapter, and it's a difficult one.

Finally, the buddha moves on to the thoroughly established character of phenomena: "Moreover, Paramarthasamudgata, the thoroughly established character of phenomena is also 'an ultimate lack of own-being.' Why is this? Paramarthasamudgata, that which is the 'selflessness of phenomena' is known as their 'lack of own-being.' That is the ultimate. Since the ultimate is distinguished as the lack of own-being of all phenomena, it is an 'ultimate lack of own-being.'" (101) Thus, the ultimate lack of own-being is the thoroughly established character of all phenomena. The ultimate lack of own-being is the way things ultimately and truly are, and when you look at things the way they really are, you are liberated. When you look at things that way, your mind and body become purified of confusion and affliction. So, it's not an abstract philosophic truth. It's a truth of spiritual liberation. When we see the ultimate lack of own-being of phenomena, we are liberated. And not only are we liberated in relationship to our daily life, but by continually meditating on this ultimate lack of own-being, our liberation becomes more and more integrated in our body and being and behavior, and we evolve toward buddhahood.

A Meditation Program

After the buddha describes the three characteristics of phenomena and the three types of lack of own-being that correspond to the three characters, the sutra presents a meditation program—a program that shows us how to enter into all these teachings. The buddha says that for people who have not yet planted the roots of virtue, people who have not purified their obstructions, who have not ripened their continuum, who do not have much conviction, who have not completed the accumulation of wisdom and merit—in other words, for people like most of us—he first teaches about the lack of own-being in terms of production. He teaches meditation on the other-dependent or, if you will, studying the mystery. That's the first step. And by studying the other-dependent, you will be transformed. You will turn from unskillful behavior to virtue. Then you will be ready to study the imputational

character, and finally you can turn to the study of the thoroughly established. But you can't go right to the thoroughly established. First, you have to become grounded in the other-dependent, in the conventional world where things seem to be happening, and where you confuse the imputational with the other-dependent. Then you turn to studying the lack of own-being in terms of character. You see that in the process of imputation you attribute essences in terms of character and attributes to things. Understanding that this imputation is a lack of own-being in terms of character—that it lacks any essence or independent substance—helps you understand the absence of this imputation in the other-dependent. Thus, understanding the characterlessness of the imputational character helps you understand the thoroughly established character, which is exactly that absence.

You start with the other-dependent, move on to the imputational, and then hopefully you discover the thoroughly established, and you meditate on that. But you keep studying and meditating on the other-dependent. It's not sufficient by itself, but you keep doing it all the time because it's the foundation of the thoroughly established. You can't see the thoroughly established unless you're also meditating on the other-dependent. It's the base from which you see the ultimate truth.

When you start meditating on dependent co-arising and the other-dependent character of phenomena, you become more and more aware that there's a confusion between what you think they are and what they really are. Then you notice that when there's no confusion, you can't see anything. It's kind of mysterious. So you go back to where you can see things, and you notice that the confusion comes back. Then you study that, and study that, and study that, until the moment comes when you see suchness. But suchness is seen in relationship to the other-dependent that you've been meditating on all along.

Meditating on the Other-Dependent

The buddha begins by telling Paramarthasamudgata, "I initially teach doctrines starting with the lack of own-being in terms of production to those beings who have not generated roots of virtue, who have not purified obstructions, who have not ripened their continuums, who do not have much conviction, and who have not completed the accumulations of merit and wisdom. When they hear those doctrines, they understand dependently originated compounded phenomena as being impermanent. They know

them to be phenomena that are unstable, unworthy of confidence, and changeable, whereupon they develop aversion and antipathy toward all compounded phenomena." (107)

Notice that he says when beings have heard this teaching. He doesn't say when they know it, or when they see the other-dependent character. He says when they hear the teaching about it. So part of honoring the other-dependent character is to hear these teachings. But I don't think he meant that we just have to hear the teachings once. I think he means that we should hear them pretty often. In fact, you have to hear the teaching until it is in your heart all day long. Every time you look at something, somebody is in your ear saying: "This thing has an other-dependent character. This phenomenon is a lack of own-being in terms of self-production. This thing can't produce itself. This thing can't keep itself going another moment." Until you have a little buddha in your ear telling you that, you have to work to always keep this teaching before you. You need to reremember the teaching until it runs through your mind all the time.

This is the basic meditation, and when you move on to other meditations, this meditation should continue. After a while, it is just like your heartbeat. So one way to honor the teaching is to listen to it, and repeat it over and over again to yourself. Another way to honor it is by reading about it, reciting it, and talking to others about it. You can also honor what the teaching points to; you can honor the way phenomena really are. Of course, other-dependence isn't the whole story about how phenomena really are, but it is the fundamental character of the way they are. So we start to train ourselves by meditating on this teaching, training ourselves to open our wisdom eye to the actual nature of phenomena, rather than the misconceived or mistaken way that phenomena are seen to be.

One way to get at this meditation is to receive what is given. When something happens, receive it. Understand that what's happening is given to you. Then meditate on that, and look to see whether or not you are receiving what's given, or whether you actually think you make what's happening happen. There is a bodhisattva precept (it's number two of the ten grave precepts) called "Not taking what is not given." If you have a body or a thought, and you don't think it's given, don't take it. Give up the mode of taking action. If an action is happening, see it as being given to you, because in fact it is being given to you.

The usual way we think is “I’m making my actions.” You know that way. Now we’re trying to learn a new way, which is “I’m receiving my actions.” Believing in self-power, or the imputational character called self-power, we get things by taking them rather than by having them given to us. As we meditate on the other-dependent character of our moment-by-moment life, we move from a feeling of pride or shame to a feeling of gratitude. We move from, “I did this and I am proud of it” or “I did this and I’m ashamed of it,” to “I received this.” We realize there is a self-production nonnature that is given by all things to this moment, and we are grateful for this life we are given.

The first grave bodhisattva precept is “Not taking life.” And this, along with the second precept, “Not taking what is not given,” are both meditations on dependent co-arising. Can you live moment to moment not taking life, not taking your life, not taking a life that’s not given? Can you give up the life that you take and receive the life that is given? When we receive the life that is given, we feel gratitude, even if it’s painful. And we understand that we’re doing a meditation that will liberate beings from that pain and all pain.

Someone who was doing this meditation once asked me, “When I’m meditating this way, where’s my responsibility? If I don’t think that I make my own decisions, if I’m not producing my own active body, then where is responsibility?” A lot of people wonder that, but actually part of this meditation is to be responsible for what you don’t make. Usually we think we’re responsible for what we do but we aren’t responsible for what someone else does. But this meditation is just the opposite; it is to be responsible for what you don’t do. For example, when it rains, most people, except certain shamans, don’t think they make the rain; they are not responsible for it. A lot of people can say, “Hey, it’s raining. I’m just receiving the rain.” This meditation is yes, you’re receiving the rain. The rain is being given to you, and you’re responsible for the rain and in the rain. The same thing is true of your actions. When you find yourself speaking, or you find your arm rising in the air, or you find anything else happening, receive that movement and be responsible for it. Be responsible for what you didn’t do, which means when somebody else raises her arm, you are responsible for that, too.

This revolution in perspective is meditation on the other-dependent. When we think, “You did that by yourself, you’re responsible, not me,” that

is believing in independent existence. That is believing the dream of separation between subject and object. If I am here and the object is over there, then objects can do something. If there is some activity of your body and mind, you did it, not me. I think I'm not responsible. And it's true that I didn't do it, but you didn't do it by yourself either. I didn't make you that way; you didn't make yourself that way. As I become willing to feel responsibility for things I don't make, like your activity, I am entering into this meditation on the lack of self-production. Meditating on unpredictable impermanent things like you, I become devoted to you. Meditating on you in your impermanence and unpredictability, I become responsible for your activity. When I take responsibility for my activity, which I equally do not produce myself, I move from pride or shame to gratitude and compassion.

Another example that comes to mind is sitting meditation. People often think that they're doing the sitting meditation. They think, I'm sitting upright doing meditation. Right? In a sense, that is meditation on the imputational character of phenomena. The phenomenon of you sitting, the imputational character of it, is that it's an independent thing, and you, an independent person, make that independent thing happen. It's nonsense, but that's the imputational character. "I make myself sit. I do meditation." So one way to meditate on the other-dependent character is to see if you can open to how your sitting—the sitting meditation that's happening—is being given to you. Receive the sitting. See the sitting that's happening right now as a gift to the body, and see the body itself as a gift. You could say that you are being given this moment. You are being given a body, and this body that is appearing to you is being produced by everything else in the universe other than the body. It's an impermanent body. It's a body that can't keep itself the same for even a moment, because it's not under its own control. It's other-powered. It lacks own-being in terms of producing itself. It's a gift to you. If the body is in upright posture, that upright posture is a gift to the body, a gift to you.

Some Zen scholars say there is an emphasis on self-power in Zen, and that makes me wonder. The idea of a Zen practice based upon self-power sounds like an idea of practice based on delusion. I think the way of Zen practice is to have people come together in a training center and to offer them various activities. Then the practitioners do these activities, and they do them on the basis of self-power, as most people do. They believe, for example, that they do the meditation practices. They believe they do the

Zen meditation. Then the teacher catches them doing meditation. Teacher says, “Are you doing meditation?” And the monk says, “Yes.” “Are you doing wholehearted meditation?” And the monk says, “Yes,” being proud that she’s doing her zazen. Then the teacher knocks her down in various ways, some of which are very famous.

One of Blanche Hartman’s favorite stories is about an interaction she had with the founder of Zen Center, Suzuki Roshi. I remember her saying that while she was meditating he asked her, “What are you doing?” And she said, “I’m doing zazen,” and he said something like: “Don’t you ever say that again,” or “Don’t you say that you do zazen,” or something more severe like, “Don’t you ever think you can do zazen!” Don’t ever think you can do anything. You can’t do anything. In other words, please meditate on how whatever activity of your body or mind appears is a gift. Meditate on how you’re being given a meditation practice, how you’re being given a body. How you’re being given a sitting body, a talking body, a standing, walking, or reclining body.

Maybe you can do some other kinds of meditation. But you really must, and I mean *must,* understand that you cannot do Buddhist meditation. Nobody, no person, has ever done Buddhist meditation, but Buddhist meditation has happened to people. It happens to people because various causes and conditions come together, and those people are responsible when it happens. When it’s happening, you’re able to respond out of that meditation. And if it doesn’t happen, that’s also a gift, and you’re responsible for that, too. If the meditation isn’t happening, it might be because you think that you are doing the meditation. So when you catch yourself doing Buddhist meditation, then confess it. The more you confess that you think you can do Buddhist practice, or walk across the street, or raise your arm, or lift your foot, or cough, the more you melt away the root of the deep misconception that you can do something by yourself.

The more you catch yourself at that, the more you turn away from action based on the delusion of self-power. You gradually make the transition to meditation on the other-powered, the other-dependent character of phenomena. This is the basic practice. You don’t do it, but it does appear in the world, and you’re responsible for it. And when it doesn’t happen, you’re responsible for it not happening, too.

I was in psychotherapy with a Jungian analyst years ago, and he told me, “When power comes in the door, love goes out the window.” Today I would

understand that as saying, “When self-power comes in the door, love goes out the window.” When self-power comes in the door, meditation on the other-powered nature goes out the window. But if you confess that the meditation on the other-powered went out the window, by that act you reenter the meditation.

Recently I was eating a vegan cookie, and someone who was sitting across the room from me asked, “What are you eating?” I told her it was vegan, because I thought that would make her lose interest. But then she said, “Does it have chocolate in it?” And I received the word “yes.” I was grateful to be in a state of receiving the word “yes,” and then I received the words from the other person: “Can I have a bite?” Then I received the activity of saying, “Yes, come over and get it,” rather than the activity of, “Well, let me walk across the room and give it to you.” I received the activity, “Come and get it.” And she came and got it, and she said, “Does that make you feel powerful, self-powerful?” She didn’t say, “Does that make you feel other-powerful?” And I said, “No, actually I feel the power, but it’s not mine. It’s just coursing through me.” And she said, “Is that because I touched you?” And I said, “Yes.”

There is power, but it’s not the self’s. It’s due to everything other than the self. The illusion of self-power is an other-powered phenomenon. The imagination, the dreaming of a self, is an other-powered phenomenon that we can’t help doing. We’re born with it. So it’s a difficult transition to move into this meditation on dependent co-arising. It’s difficult to walk around in this world meditating on how what’s happening is a gift, and receiving the life that’s given. Can you meditate on the life that’s given, the life that’s given and taken away every moment?

Got a life? Give it back. Let it go. Receive it, use it for a while, give it away. This is the basic meditation. This meditation on the other-dependent character of phenomena is also called a meditation on the way phenomena are beyond your thought. It’s meditation on a mystery, because you can’t really see the way things are other-dependent. You can’t see all the things that come together to give you your life. So meditating on how your life is a gift to you is meditating on the total mystery of how your life arises. It is opening to that mystery, becoming closer and more intimate with that mystery.

Then, as we become more intimate with the mystery, we develop a sense of dread of going back to the old self-power approach. It’s familiar, it’s

powerful, and it makes you think you've got control of your life. But when I think I'm in control of me, or when I think I'm in control of you, love goes out the window, and I am trapped in suffering.

Another way to bring these teachings into our lives is to meditate on impermanence. Because I am dependent on others, I can't hold on to myself, I can't control myself. Because I am dependent on others, I am unreliable, unstable, and impermanent. Meditating on my impermanence is meditating on buddha's wisdom. Meditating on how I arise moment by moment by the power of others, how I am just an impermanent passing phenomenon, is meditation on the central character of phenomena, the other-dependent character. But it's hard to meditate on our impermanence because it terrifies us. We have deep habits to ignore it, so we can see this sense of self we create as something real, something dependable. But in fact, we arise in moment-by-moment creation, depending on the entire universe, and depending on the entire universe, we cease. I arise and I cease, and so do you. But because of the process of imputation, we don't see it. Because people like me impute permanence to their impermanent lives, they become deluded. So I, this passing impermanent phenomenon, project an essence, an illusion of permanence, onto what is impermanent. But even though I may be projecting an illusion of permanence, the projection itself is impermanent, because it's just my action. It's hard for me to see impermanence because I project essences onto my dear little life. And when I project essences and confuse them with this impermanent dependent co-arising, I confuse what I think with what is really happening. Then things look like they are permanent and solid, and I can't see what's really going on.

Another reason it's hard to actually look at impermanence is because we think, Oh, I know what impermanence is. But do you, really? Look more carefully. You might find that what you think impermanence is is actually not impermanence but just your thoughts about it. Actual impermanence is not what you think it is. People are not what you think they are. You are not what you think you are. You're something else.

What you are is inconceivably beautiful. And that beauty lies in the absence of all your ideas about it. And when you confuse the beautiful way you are with your ideas, you don't see the beauty. You just see your idea of the beauty, which is not the beauty. The beauty is here in the absence of

your ideas. It is impermanent, out of control, other-dependent. The beauty of you and the beauty of me is this other-dependent character.

If you keep listening to this teaching and then apply it to your body, your perspective will change. You come to really understand that your body actually is impermanent, that your behavior is impermanent, that your health is impermanent, that your spiritual practice is impermanent, that the people you love most are impermanent, and the people you love least are impermanent. You see that the people you love most do not exist by their own power. They cannot keep themselves going or control themselves. They cannot produce themselves, and you cannot produce or control yourself. If we don't listen to that teaching, our natural ignorance of reality easily leads us to think things are permanent and worthy of confidence. But they aren't. It is not appropriate to have confidence in yourself or other people, because they are unstable and impermanent. You can love them, you can support them, you can let them support you, but they are not worthy of confidence.

One of the things I've heard from some wonderful people who are disciples of buddha is the expression "Everything changes." But that's not actually what the buddha said. The way he put it is, "Everything that arises is impermanent." But not everything arises. There are things that don't arise that are permanent. One of the things that doesn't arise, that doesn't exist, is the status of being an independent self. Essences don't arise—by definition they can't—and they don't cease. They're permanent. And the fact of emptiness—that what's happening is free of our ideas about it—that doesn't happen either, and it's permanent. The way things actually are, which is free of our ideas about it, that's permanent. It doesn't arise or pass away. But anything that arises ceases.

All things that are put together, that depend on other things, are impermanent. When the conditions come together, they arise. When the conditions change, they cease. But those things never have any independent essence, any self. There is no such thing, even though we think there is. We superimpose an idea of self on them so we can talk about them. We put a self on what's happening so we can talk about beauty, so we can talk about pain, so we can talk about this amazing world. But actually it never takes hold. We only become confused. In fact, the way things are is always free of our ideas about it, but if we confuse the two, we feel unfree and afflicted.

How can we meditate on impermanence? We start by meditating on our idea of impermanence. How can we meditate on other-dependence? We start by confusing actual other-dependence with our idea of other-dependence, because that's what we do. But doing this meditation is hard, because when we do it, we go through a major psychic transformation. We switch from ignoring what's happening to paying attention to what's happening. We see how we obscure what's happening, and how we confuse and distract ourselves.

When we start to notice how we're distracting ourselves from what's happening, we start to pay attention and become closer to what's really going on. When we start to see how we superimpose things on what's happening, we get closer to realizing the absence of the superimposition. When we see that, we begin the process of becoming free. But all this is not easy to look at. The same person who I think I heard say, "Everything changes"—one of the most important and helpful people in my life—also taught that our practice is just to be ourselves. Just to be yourself could mean just to be your idea of yourself, but I take it to mean that you should be who you actually are, free of your idea of yourself. To actually be the impermanent, other-powered person you are.

You actually are a person. You do actually depend on everybody else. The one thing you don't depend on in this whole universe is yourself, but you depend on everything else, and everything else has power in your life. That's who you really are, and our practice is to be that person. Our practice is to be that unpredictable, unreliable, undependable, impermanent, other-dependent, inconceivably beautiful person. Everybody is, moreover, the *same* inconceivably beautiful person. In order to be ourselves, we must understand that, and we must understand that we cannot do it on our own. Because, in fact, everybody is helping us be who we are.

I sometimes think a lot of people wish I were a different kind of person. But actually, when you don't want me to be the way I am, that helps me be who I am. No matter what you think of me, and no matter what you say about me, I'm here by your support. Our practice is to just be ourselves, to understand how everybody supports us to be the way we are and how that means we're impermanent. We don't have to worry about making ourselves the way we are. We don't have to worry about anything. What we do need to do in the buddha way is to open our eyes and see how everyone constantly supports us being the way we are, how everyone kindly takes us

away, and puts us back, and takes us away again. According to the teaching of the other-dependent character of your life, you are always supported by all beings. You are never on your own. But who you are may be a person who often doesn't see that that's the case—who doesn't really feel that people want you to be the way you are. And maybe some people don't want you to be who you are, but that is exactly their way of contributing to who you are.

The buddha makes it very clear that hearing, studying, and meditating on these teachings on the lack of own-being in terms of production will change your life, and after that all these wonderful transformations will happen. First, he says that these teachings lead to the realization that all compounded phenomena are impermanent, and those who receive that teaching realize that phenomena "are unstable, unworthy of confidence, and changeable, whereupon they develop aversion and antipathy toward all compounded phenomena." Then he goes on to say that once someone develops aversion and antipathy toward compounded phenomena, they turn away from wrongdoing. "They do not commit any wrong-doing, and they adhere to virtue. Because of adhering to virtue, they generate roots of virtue that were not previously generated. They also purify obscurations that were not previously purified. They also ripen their continuums, which were not previously ripened. On that basis, they have great conviction, and they complete the accumulations of merit and wisdom." (107–09)

When beings hear these teachings, they understand that dependently co-arisen phenomena are impermanent, unstable, and unworthy of confidence. When they understand that, they develop a feeling of dread or discouragement toward these impermanent phenomena. You might, for example, develop a sense of dread or discouragement with regard to your body or with regard to your wife or husband. That sounds kind of scary, right? But the way I understand it is you develop a dread or discouragement about excessive involvement and attachment to compositional phenomena, not the phenomena themselves. You no longer look to impermanent things to make you happy. When we think that impermanent things will make us happy, it means we're not listening to the teaching that these things are other-dependent, because that means that they will not last. It means we still think that things out there exist on their own, and that I exist over here on my own. But when I start to open to the teaching that things do not stand on their own and are impermanent and unpredictable, then I start to shift from

the point of view of me being a self-powered thing to me being other-powered. Then all my excessive attachment to compositional phenomena melts away.

When we develop these feelings of dread, we turn away from unskillful deeds—deeds that arise from the belief that the things we're working with exist on their own. If you see others as independent, your relationships with them are going to be off, even if you feel you love them dearly. If you believe that you're independent of them, even though you try to do good, you don't. Or at least the good you do is undermined by your failure to listen to the teaching that what you're relating to are other-dependent phenomena. When you hear the teaching, you turn away from excessive involvement with impermanent things. You switch from a self-powered, me-oriented involvement with impermanent things to a way of being with impermanent things that accords with their other-powered nature. In other words, you move toward practicing virtue.

What is virtue? Virtue is turning toward a life that is devoted to the mystery of dependently co-arisen phenomena, a life of devotion to the welfare of all dependently co-arisen beings. Thus, you become discouraged about trying to get anything from them. In fact, you develop a fear, a dread, of that approach, and you switch to the approach of being devoted to all dependent co-arisings. You still pay attention to them, but you quit trying to control them, because you understand that it's not possible. When difficult situations come up, you respond in a virtuous way, in a way that doesn't harm others or yourself. If you do not meditate on the other-dependent and, say, violence comes up, you get polarized by it. Polarized means you join it or you don't join it. You fight it or give in to it. That's polarizing. But if you meditate on the other-dependent, you become like a windbell. You move with the flow of the situation, and wonderfully skillful responses can come up. You don't become paralyzed, because you don't believe your dream. When you believe your dream, you are under its control. You are manipulated. You are the slave of your fantasies.

We have to bring these teachings to mind to counteract our fantasies. The fantasies are not going to stop, but we can stop believing them. This belief begins to erode when we remind ourselves that there is another character of phenomena besides the dreamlike quality. This character is beyond our dream, beyond our thinking. People who don't see this are afraid to let go. But actually it is good to go limp in a lot of situations, because then you can

move. You can twist and turn and move into the appropriate response. If you are tense and rigid, you do not learn.

I played judo when I was in college. The word *judo* actually means "gentle or soft way," so although judo is a martial art, we say "play" judo rather than "fight." Some of the guys I worked with were big and strong, and almost no one could move them an inch. But because they resisted their playmate's offerings of force and energy, they could never learn anything about judo. The people who could learn things were the ones who could be moved and thrown into the air. The ones who weren't afraid to fall to the mat were the ones who could learn the gentle way.

They say that playing with the founder of judo, Kano Jigoro, was like playing with a little towel. A towel has no ideas. If you pull this way, it goes this way. If you pull that way, it goes that way. Now, if you are playing with a towel, you may find that if you are going one way and you have all this energy, your energy throws you across the room. If you try pushing really hard, you may find that it moves out of the way, and you fall on your face.

Notice that the sutra says that bodhisattvas become disaffected toward, or disappointed in, or not excessively involved in, compounded phenomena, but it doesn't say all phenomena. It says all compounded phenomena. In other words, it's okay to have confidence in a certain type of phenomenon called suchness or emptiness, because it is not constructed and has no beginning or end. You don't have to turn away from all phenomena. But the buddha makes it clear that all things, all sentient beings, are worthy of compassion but unworthy of confidence.

As you realize this teaching in terms of your daily life, your attitude toward it starts to change, and you become disenchanted. And this disenchantment is a first step in wisdom training. You will probably notice that you hear the teachings in some cases but not in others, and that you are still enchanted by some things. But as your understanding grows, you become increasingly disenchanted with the belief that things will give you happiness, or that people will give you happiness, even if they are beautiful, lovely, nice people. Because you've heard this teaching, when beautiful people don't give you happiness, you don't become frightened and hate them for it. And when beautiful people don't look so beautiful, you don't try to make them put their makeup back on. Your behavior changes, because you stop getting excessively involved with things and treating impermanent phenomena as if they were going to last. Instead, you start

treating things in the Middle Way, that is to say, appropriately. If you have been trying to be compassionate toward people, you now are able to be more effectively compassionate. You are more appropriately involved with people, because you hear the teaching that everyone is impermanent, everyone is unstable, everyone is unworthy of confidence, and no one is going to give you happiness.

What is going to bring happiness? Happiness comes when you respond appropriately to each person and each situation. What brings happiness is not the people you meet but the fact that you treat each person with true compassion. The same thing is true of your suffering. The people who fill your life are not the cause of your unhappiness. It's treating those people inappropriately that makes you suffer. Buddhas have infinite care for all beings, and they can be that way because they do not care excessively for any particular being. Relating to people with excessive involvement, or insufficient involvement, brings unhappiness, and relating to people with the proper amount of involvement brings happiness. Caring too much or too little for others is not really caring. When we ignore the people before us or care excessively for them, it is really self-concern. This simple teaching helps us relate to things in a way that brings true freedom.

I recommend that we listen to these teachings and apply them moment by moment to everything we meet: to the people we meet, to the situations we encounter, to our own feelings and thoughts. See how life changes when you listen to this teaching, and see how it applies to phenomena. Maybe you'll notice that you actually want to continue to be excessively involved with some things and that you don't want to pay attention to this teaching. You may not like the unhappiness this excessive involvement brings, but you may like the comfort of the habitual side of it. At least you know that if you bang your head on the wall it will hurt, and that is kind of comforting. What will happen if you open to people the way they really are? A lot of people become afraid, because they start opening up to a new vision of reality. They see that things are beyond their control, and that can be scary.

I am completely confident that this teaching is a path to truth, but I am also confident that it is a very challenging one. People have a lot of emotional difficulty in the transition from the untrained state to the trained state. When people get freaked out during training, my job is to watch the freak-out, and watch my dream about what the freak-out is, and not fall for my dream. That is my challenge, and it is really hard. When people have a

hard time, I need to see that it is hard to make this transition from believing what you think to opening to something beyond what you think.

This doesn't mean denigrating what you think; it just means that you don't have to believe it is real. It is what you think. It is just conception. I tell my students to wean themselves from grasping their thoughts so tightly and taking them so seriously, and then to let me know if they think they are becoming immoral. But I haven't noticed that they stop caring about people. They might have a little emotional squall and say, "If I can't believe what I think about people, then I'm not going to care about them at all. I'm just not going to have feelings anymore." When I hear that, I have to think, "You are not really what I think of you right now. I can keep caring about you, because you are not how you appear to be, pouting about all that. You are beyond that." So if I don't pout because you're pouting, then maybe you can see that you don't have to pout either.

Just like us, this teaching is an impermanent thing, ungraspable. So I ask you to open up to the ungraspable, inconceivable nature of phenomena. Of course, phenomena also have a conceivable aspect, and the fundamental meditation requires you to pay careful attention to the conceivable and open to the inconceivable.

Yet despite the wonderful, transformative nature of these teachings on other-dependence and the lack of own-being in terms of production, they still won't take us all the way. They are not the totality of practice. They are not completely purifying. As the buddha put it after he described the effects of these teachings: "However, because they do not understand, as they are, the two aspects pertaining to lack of own-being in terms of production—lack of own-being in terms of character and ultimate lack of own-being—they do not become wholly averse toward all compounded phenomena. They do not become separated from attachment. They do not become fully liberated. They do not become fully liberated from the afflictive afflictions nor fully liberated from the afflictions of actions nor fully liberated from the afflictions of birth." (109) So here the sutra basically says: Even though you will make great progress in the buddha way when you practice meditation on the lack of own-being in terms of self-production, you will not be completely released from attachment and the bondage to suffering. You're somewhat free of attachment, but not completely free.

This meditation does not completely purify, but it does transform. It changes your life. If you practice it diligently, it initiates an ethical

reformation that will transform your conduct. When you see someone, you might, for example, have the thought that this person is saying something really horrible, really outrageous, unbelievably shocking. If you apply the teachings on the other-dependent character of phenomena that have appeared out of your dreaming process, then you are less likely to do anything unskillful. You won't cling so tightly to your belief that this person really is acting horribly, and it will temper your wrath and protect you from acting in a cruel way. It will also help you develop your ability to be kind to beings that you think deserve some cruel treatment. It doesn't quite purify your mind, but it tempers your mind so your behavior starts to become more and more virtuous, and that is really a lot to accomplish. But further meditations are necessary in order to purify the mind so there is no confusion at all, because at this point there is still confusion. You are still tempted to believe that this person is acting in a self-serving way or something a lot worse. And you still might feel bad about it, but you start not to take your thoughts so seriously.

Meditating on the Imputational and Thoroughly Established Characters

After describing the effects that the teachings on the lack of own-being in terms of production have and don't have, the buddha goes on to the describe his next teachings: "The Tathagatha further teaches them doctrines beginning with lack of own-being in terms of character and ultimate lack of own-being. Thus they become wholly averse toward all compounded phenomena, separated from attachment, and liberated; they pass beyond the afflictive afflictions, pass beyond the afflictions of actions, and pass beyond the afflictions of birth." (109) These bodhisattvas have already come a long way, but in order for them to be fully liberated, they have to do two other meditations: the meditation on the lack of own-being in terms of character —in other words, the meditation on the imputational character—and the meditation on the ultimate lack of own-being, or what the sutra calls the thoroughly established character. These advanced meditations, however, depend upon two foundational meditations. We first have to practice *samatha,* or tranquillity meditation, so we can become calm by giving up our discursive thought. Then we reintroduce discursive thought and use it to study the other-dependent character of phenomena. Only then are we ready to turn to the next meditations on the imputational and thoroughly established characters.

Suppose you are doing tranquillity meditation, and your practice is to give up being involved with whatever arises. In this practice, something arises, and that's it. You hear something, and that is it. You see something, and that is it. You don't get into any discursive activity around it. But then, when you are calm and something arises you may say: "I'm going to think about this. I'm going to practice insight with this and apply a teaching to it." And the first teaching is that what has arisen is a dependent co-arising and this thing did not make itself happen. It looks solid, and it looks like it made itself happen, but it didn't.

There is another conversation I can have with myself that is related to the first kind of meditation on the other-dependent. The sutra tells us that the other-dependent character is known by misconstruing it as the image we have of it. So I have images of something called Monday, and those images are the way I know this thing called Monday. But I also remember the teaching that Monday actually is beyond my thinking about it. So I am thinking of Monday, but I listen to the teaching that Monday is beyond my thinking of Monday.

If this kind of conversation can occur in tranquillity without disturbing the tranquillity, it is true insight work. If other kinds of discursive thought occur, or if even that discursive thought disturbs the tranquillity, there are probably some corrupting elements coming into the analysis. Perhaps you are trying to get something out of it, rather then just joyfully, skillfully carrying on the wholesome activity of investigating the appearance of the phenomena called Monday or the thought "I have pain in my knee." Stopping there and giving up any discursive thought is training in tranquillity. But if I am tranquil, and a pain in my knee arises, I might say, "This is a dependent co-arising." I realize that the dependent co-arising of this pain in my knee is the basis of and beyond my image of the pain. So I have an image of the pain, by which I am grasping it, but I am also remembering the teaching that the actual pain has a nature that is beyond my thinking about it. If I can talk to myself that way, and continue to be calm, then I am doing insight work. And the more I do that, the more this teaching sinks in to me, and the more I am transformed by it. So in this meditation, I am calm and I am using my discursive thought to bring the teachings into my mind and let them live there. As a result, I am gradually taken over by dharma and transformed by the takeover. Once this transformation has taken place and you are "well cooked," then you can add

on the next level: studying signs—that is, studying the imputational character.

It's like juggling. You start throwing the samatha ball up and down, then you throw the samatha and the discursive thought balls. Now you attain samatha. Now you give up the samatha training, and you start using discursive thought again. You start thinking of dependent co-arising, and then you flip back and forth. Can you think of dependent co-arising and maintain samatha both at the same time? Or do you drop the samatha ball when you think of dependent co-arising? If you lose the samatha, put dependent co-arising down and get the samatha back. Okay, got the samatha? Go back to dependent co-arising, and throw them back and forth.

Once you have those two balls going, you can add the third one. You can start looking at the signs that you have been seeing all along but haven't been analyzing. Up until this point, you have been using your discursive thought to apply the teaching of dependent co-arising to these images. Once that is well established, you can start looking at the signs you have of these things, and recognizing that those signs are an interpretation of the direct experience. And in this effort, there are many teachings to guide you. The last chapters we have gone over all help you understand, analyze, and investigate the relationship between the image of your knee, the image of the pain, the image of Monday, and the direct experience. You see there is an image that is indirect and identifiable. The more you meditate on that image and study it, the more you see that this whole process involves an imputation of essence. You look at the way your mind interprets the other-dependent character—the immediate experience that is not known to you—over and over again. You start to be able to see: "Okay, I've got these interpreted signs, which are based on the uninterpreted and made in connection with words. Then there is this projection of self in there, and I see the image, this image of essence. And if I take it away, the whole thing breaks down, and if I put it back, it works."

The process of studying signs depends on the two basic meditations: tranquillity meditation and the first level of insight meditation. Then the next step is to meditate on how it is that this image is actually absent in the immediacy. Or to put it the other way around, how it is that if we have the image, we lose the immediacy. The interpretation separates us from the immediacy. But once we have this knowing, this meaningful experience that separates us from the immediacy, that interpretation becomes another

immediate experience. So our immediate experience is transformed by our indirect interpretive experience. And it is transformed in a different way if we are aware of what we are doing than if we are not. The interpretation can be more or less conscious, but either way that interpretation transforms our physical basis. Then our physical basis offers us another immediate experience that we feel in a kind of an unknown way and we wish to identify. As you get more and more skillful with this, you see you create an image of what is going on, so it can be meaningful, and this image is connected to a word. You come to realize that you are also projecting an own-being onto this immediate experience that you just interpreted as an image connected to a word. When you do this, you are learning about the imputational character. You are learning about the process of fantasy, where you make interpretations and project things that aren't there.

Another way to say it is that we need to go into the devil's workshop, the *manas's* workshop, or the magician's workshop. Whatever you call it, you fully engage it and study it. You illuminate the process of delusion. And the more you see, the more you realize that what you perceive is actually just an illusion. Then, when you see it's not really there, everything looks different, and you see the thoroughly established. After that, even when the dream reappears, you won't fall for it again. You see it is just an illusion. But you have to be careful. It is a good basic principle to not proceed into this insight work unless you are calm and buoyant. If that deteriorates, it is a sign that the insight work is not being done quite right, and it is probably good to put it aside for a while and calm down again.

The meditation on the thoroughly established is based on the three earlier meditations: the meditation on tranquillity, on the other-dependent, and on signs, or the imputational character. Based on that strong foundation, we can go on to what we call removing signs. Removing signs means removing the image by which you interpret. You have immediate experiences, but with no way to make them meaningful. One way to talk about this process is that we are removing signs; another way is that we are meditating on suchness, on things as they really are. But before you can remove signs or meditate on suchness, you have to understand signs, so you know where to apply the meditation on suchness. Remember, however, that we always have to be meditating on the basic teaching of dependent co-arising, as well. This promotes virtue, which keeps our ethical practice going, right in the middle of the wisdom practice, without even thinking about the

precepts. At this level, the wisdom practice maintains the virtue practice all by itself. That way, you don't have to turn away from your wisdom practice to go back to ethical discipline. It will be cared for in this meditation.

Sometimes the sutra talks about meditating on "objects and teachings," and sometimes it says meditating on "meanings and teachings." The Sanskrit word *artha* refers to both an object and a meaning, or truth. The Chinese translated *artha* as "meaning," and if you look at the Tibetan translation, you find "object." So what you are removing, what you are meditating on, are these arthas, which are objects, or meanings, or teachings. We remove the signs of all the ordinary objects of experience, but we're also going to remove the signs of the teachings. We need to imagine these signs and put them on the teachings so we can talk about them, but we also need to remove the signs from the teachings and from all other objects, as well. Thus, we can open to their reality.

After we are free of the signs of phenomena, we can see how the imputational character is actually absent in what is going on in the immediacy of our life. It really doesn't characterize what is happening, except to the extent that it characterizes how imagining takes place. But the essences we project are totally absent in the other-dependent. That is the most profound meditation. That is the meditation on the thoroughly established character of phenomena, or as the sutra says in the next chapter, meditation on mind-only or cognition-only.

People often confuse meditation on the other-dependent without any imputations or signs with meditation on the thoroughly established, but they are not the same. Meditation on the other-dependent without our ideas of it is like meditating on a man without a hat. You see the man, and you see all of his head, and there is no hat on it. In other words, the man is there without his hat of imputations, and you meditate on the man—on your direct experience. But meditating on the thoroughly established is like meditating on the absence of the hat. You look at the man, and you see that his hat of imputations is not there, and you meditate on that absence. A man without a hat implies the absence of the hat, but the man is not the absence of the hat. He just doesn't have a hat on. But the absence of the hat explicitly refutes the presence of the hat. It is not about the man at all. It is only about the absence of the hat.

So the man without a hat is the other-dependent without an imputation, without a self projected on it. This other-dependent co-arising that doesn't

have a self implicitly refutes the self. But the explicit and direct refutation of self is the absence of self, period. The absence of the hat is the absence of self, and it is the thoroughly established. Thus, the thoroughly established is the explicit refutation of self, and the other-dependent is the implicit refutation of self. That is why meditating on the man without the hat is actually not going to purify your vision. It lacks the power to explicitly contradict the illusion of self. It is not meditating on the ultimate. But meditating on the thoroughly established has that power. It is the object of purification. It is the ultimate.

chapter seven

ANALYZING MEDITATION

ALL THE TEACHINGS we have been looking at have profound things to tell us about meditation, but this chapter of the sutra focuses on it explicitly. In the translations from the Chinese, this chapter is titled "Analysis of Centering" or "Analysis of Yoga." In the translation from the Tibetan, it is titled "The Questions of Maitreya." *Maitreya* means "love" or "loving-kindness," and Maitreya is the name of the next buddha who is to come to our world in the future.

Samatha and Vipasyana

The Tibetan translation begins with the bodhisattva Maitreya asking the buddha: "Bhagavan, abiding in what and depending on what do Bodhisattvas in the Great Vehicle cultivate samatha and vipasyana?" *Samatha* refers to tranquillity, *and vipasyana (vipassana)* refers to insight or wisdom. The buddha answers: "Maitreya, abiding in and depending upon an unwavering resolution to expound the doctrinal teachings and to become unsurpassably, perfectly enlightened, [Bodhisattvas cultivate samatha and vipasyana]." (149)

This translation emphasizes the idea that bodhisattvas have an unwavering resolution to expound the teachings and to attain supreme perfect awakening. A lot of people I meet who devote their lives to the practice of the buddha way, even those practicing the Mahayana, don't think they are ever going to be teaching it. But this sutra says that bodhisattvas who practice this yoga have an unwavering resolution to expound the teachings for the welfare of all living beings. They vow to give the gift of dharma. This resolution is related to the third of the four vows that we often chant at the Zen Center: "Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them." *Enter* means to go into something, but it is also often used to refer to gaining the deepest possible understanding. The meaning of the original Chinese is closer to "understand" or "master." But "enter" works too, because it means that you would understand and actually enter into and become the teachings. So according to these great vows, part of being a bodhisattva is that you actually vow to learn all the teachings and enter deeply into understanding and teaching them.

The translations of this sutra from the Chinese seem to have different answers to Maitreya's question than the Tibetan translation. Thomas Cleary's translation says: "Based on what, abiding in what, do enlightening

beings practice tranquillity and observation in the great vehicle? The Buddha replied, 'You should know that the basis and abode of practice of tranquillity and observation in the great vehicle are the provisional setups of the ways of enlightening beings, and sustaining the determination for supreme perfect enlightenment.'"[1]

John Keenan's translation says, "When a Bodhisattva practices the meditation of quietude and vision, what is his support? What is his station? The Buddha answered 'Maitreya, good son, you should understand that in the great vehicle when a Bodhisattva practices the meditation of quietude and vision, his support and station is the conventional exposition of the doctrine and the commitment not to cast off full, supreme awakening.'"[2] So the bodhisattvas are supported by the teachings and supported by the commitment to attain supreme awakening. Neither of the Chinese translations says that they are supported by the commitment to both expound the teachings and attain enlightenment, as the translation from the Tibetan does.

Of course, there are many ways to teach. You can teach this sutra by giving dharma talks, and you can teach it by working in the kitchen. But the point is you understand that as you work in the kitchen you're teaching the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra.* When you work in the fields, you're teaching the *Heart Sutra* and the Middle Length Discourses of the buddha. You understand that both what you are doing and how you are doing it expounds these teachings. If anybody asks you any questions, you can show them: hand them a shovel, give them a seven-hour dharma talk, or do a dance. You can expound it in many ways, but the point is that you are expounding it.

So there are different emphases in the Chinese and the Tibetan translations, but either way there is a challenge. In one case, these teachings are your support, and you are going to stand in them. In the other case, you are not just going to stand in them, you are going to expound them and teach them to others. In both cases, you are going to be intimate with all the teachings, and dedicate yourself to reaching unsurpassed perfect enlightenment.

I would add that this resolution also abides in and depends upon the practice of giving, ethical discipline, patience, and enthusiastic and diligent practice. This is the unwavering resolution that supports the practice of tranquillity and insight, and it is really about being kind and compassionate.

Even before formally practicing tranquillity and insight, the bodhisattvas listen to and read the teachings of the buddha. And as they read and listen, they practice generosity. They also practice precepts while they listen to the teachings. They are patient while they listen, and they are diligent in listening, in patience, in precepts, and in giving. Under those circumstances, they hear well the teachings, they apprehend them well, they repeat them well, they memorize them well, they analyze them well. Then, if they practice samatha and vipasyana, they fully realize the teachings.

Next Maitreya says: "'The Bhagavan has taught that four things are objects of observation of samatha and vipasyana: conceptual images, non-conceptual images, the limits of phenomena, and accomplishment of the purpose. Bhagavan, how many of these are objects of observation of samatha?' [The Bhagavan] replied: 'One: non-conceptual images.' 'How many are objects of observation of vipasyana?' [The Bhagavan] replied: 'Only one: conceptual images.' 'How many are objects of observation of both?' [The Bhagavan] replied: 'There are two: the limits of phenomena and accomplishment of the purpose.'" (149)

The "limits of phenomena" means all phenomena, both conventional and ultimate. It includes all compounded things, all conventional reality, and the ultimate meaning itself (that is, emptiness). This passage says that all phenomena, everything that exists, are an object of both tranquillity and insight meditation, but one observes all phenomena as nonconceptual images, and the other observes all phenomena as conceptual images. So they both observe the whole range of phenomena, but they observe them differently. The other thing that they both observe is the accomplishment of the purpose of the path. They both observe the expounding of the teaching, and they both observe supreme enlightenment.

Then Maitreya asks: "'Bhagavan, abiding in and depending upon these four objects of observation of samatha and vipasyana, how do Bodhisattvas seek samatha and become skilled in vipasyana?'" And the buddha replies, "Maitreya, I have set forth these [twelve forms of] doctrinal teachings to Bodhisattvas: Sutras, discourses in prose and verse, prophetic discourses, verses, purposeful statements, specific teachings, narratives, historical discourses, stories of [the Buddha's] former lives, extensive discourses, discourses on miraculous phenomena, and discourses that delineate [topics of specific knowledge]. Bodhisattvas hear well, apprehend well, repeat

well, analyze well with their minds, and through insight, fully realize these [teachings].” (149–51)

Then he adds, “Remaining in seclusion, having genuinely settled [their minds] inwardly, they mentally attend to those doctrines just as they have contemplated them.” (151) That last sentence is actually shorthand for samatha and vipasyana. The bodhisattvas are practicing giving, precepts, patience, and diligence. Now, in seclusion, they genuinely settle their minds inwardly. In other words, they practice samatha. They settle their minds and turn their light around and shine it back. Having given up involvement with the world and with mental activity around objects, their minds are clear and unobstructed. Then they continuously attend to this clear, ever-present mind. Of course, this mind is always clear, but now it is not distracted by the involvement with the objects that are generated together with the clear awareness. The bodhisattvas turn away from involvement with objects, that is, from being discursive with them, and they return to the awareness of the inner mind. In short, they “genuinely settle their minds inwardly.” Having settled, the bodhisattavas’ tranquil minds pivot and start contemplating these doctrines that they have previously learned well. This settling down is tranquillity, or samatha, and the meditation on the teaching is vipasyana.

The buddha then gives more detailed instructions about how to practice tranquillity. In the translation from Tibetan, he says: “With continuous inner attention, they mentally attend to that mind which is mentally contemplated by any mind.” (151) Keenan’s translation from the Chinese renders that phrase a little differently: “In the continuity of their inner minds, they focus and reflect, and repeatedly abide in this correct practice.”[3] But all the translations point to the same process. So this is the basic instruction: with continuous mental attention, contemplate that mind that is contemplated by any mind.

Looking at the mind which is contemplated by any mind is giving up discursive thought. When we observe the world and give up discursive thought, we are looking at the mind which is contemplated by any mind. If you look at the floor or listen to a sound without thinking about it, you are actually looking at the mind that is observed by all minds. When you have given up any discursive activity that tells you what it is, then the floor is the mind. By doing this, you have actually turned your light around and shined it back on the mind that is observed by all minds.

In a way, we are addicted to discursive thought in the same way an alcoholic is addicted to drinking. Samatha is like looking directly at the state of being sober, but it's hard to do. It's easier to see giving up drinking. But if you give up drinking for a long enough time, you may actually find sobriety. When you first give up drinking, you are not necessarily sober. You're not drinking, but you are thinking about it, or you're feeling there is something else you need to do to fix up the situation. But when you are actually sober, you have no interest in doing anything to meddle with what's going on. But that way of being is hard to see. It's not really graspable, but it can be realized.

What is sobriety? Where is sobriety? We could say sobriety is the absence of addiction. Discursive thought is an addiction in the sense that it is one of the ways we distract ourselves from the reality of phenomena. So in this meditation we are trying to let go of any addiction to discursive thought and become sober. Moment by moment we give up our logical approach to our experience and our endless trains of thought.

In some ways, it is easier to notice that you are addicted to alcohol, that you are caught by it, than to see the place where there is simply no impulse to drink, the place where there is just awareness. Just as an alcoholic has the impulse to drink, most people have the impulse and predisposition to make conventional designations so they can carry on discursive thought. But whether or not someone has conventional designations and discursive thought going on, there is always mind in each moment of life. Diving into the way of being that is uninterrupted by conceptual involvement is more direct than spending our time cutting off discursive thought or confessing the involvement in discursive thought and letting go of it. But snipping off all these trains of thought or stopping them before they get started may be easier at the beginning. Directly jumping into this realm of true sobriety may be a bit too much for many people.

When you settle into looking at this mind that is contemplated by any mind, there is just the mind sitting there. When you look at that, you are looking at things unhampered by conceptual interruptions or manipulation. It is quite similar to wisdom training, where we are looking at emptiness, because that work involves seeing the absence of any conceptualization. In wisdom training, we see the innocence of the phenomenon of a self or the concept of self. And that in turn is like samatha practice, which is innocent

of conceptual involvement with the world. These two gestures of the meditating mind are never really separate.

Although the practice of counting and following the breath is not specifically mentioned in this chapter of the sutra, it is entirely compatible with the sutra's tranquillity instruction to "attend to the uninterrupted mind with continuous mental attention." (157) Counting and following the breath are two of the innumerable methods for developing calm concentration by giving up discursive thought.

The second ancestor in the Soto Zen lineage in Japan, Koun Ejo, wrote a text called, "Absorption in the Treasury of Light," or as I like to say, "Absorption in the Womb of Light," in which he tells us to trust everything to inhalation and exhalation. Trust everything to breathing in and breathing out, and then leap into the womb of light and don't look back. Leaping into the womb of light is meditating on the inner stream of the meditating consciousness. It is trusting everything to the inhalation and exhalation—in other words, putting all your attention on your inhalation and exhalation without conceptual reflection. You might start by saying, "This is an inhalation" or "This is an exhalation," but really trusting everything to the inhalation and exhalation is to be with them untouched by any conception of them. In that way, you are actually starting to look at the mind—not its reflections, but the mind itself. What mind? The uninterrupted mind. The mind that is uninterrupted by all the transformations into *alaya, manas, manovijnana*, and the sense-consciousnesses.

Koun Ejo says, after you leap into the womb of light, don't look back. In other words, continuously attend to this womb of light. When you use this womb of light as an object of contemplation in tranquillity meditation, there are no conceptual images to reflect upon—nothing to tell you what it is, or where it is. You are looking at something right in front of you, deep inside you. But you are not using any way to find it or know what it is. It is continuous mental attention to the continuity of the inner uninterrupted mind.

Koun Ejo's teacher, Dogen, says, learn the backward step that turns the light around and shines it back. That is the same instruction as the one from Koun Ejo. Turn the light around and shine it back on the mind which is contemplated by any mind. Shine the light back on the light, and contemplate that light without using any image to tell what you what the light is.

The Questions of Yangshan

In the Zen tradition, there are innumerable stories that center on working with this practice. Yangshan asked a monk, "Where were you born?" and the monk replied, "Yu province." Yangshan said, "Do you think of that place?" The monk replied, "I'm always thinking of it." Yangshan said, "That which thinks is the mind. That which is thought of is the environment. In that, there are such things as mountains, rivers, the great earth, towers and buildings, people and animals. Think back to the mind that thinks." Next he asked the monk: "Then is there something there?" The monk said, "When I reach this realm, I don't see anything at all."[4]

"Thinking of that place" refers to the way the mind works. The mind is always thinking of where it has been before. There is living experience, but living experience is not thought of. What is thought of is our past. We're always thinking of our past. When Yangshan asks, "Do you think of that place?" he is asking, "Do you have a mind that is always thinking?" This monk understands that he is always thinking of where he comes from. He knows that he deals with what's happening in terms of the past, in terms of past karma, and his answer expresses both his experience and his understanding of the teaching.

There is another meaning of "always thinking of Yu province": We always think back to the origin of our experience. We always think of where our experience is born. We are both yearning for and thinking about the place we come from, which is the basis of our thinking. We don't necessarily know we are yearning for it, but we do want to go back to it, because that place is the home of our thinking. In this sutra, the home of our thinking is called the storehouse consciousness. Our thinking of Yu province functions on two levels: on an active conscious level, we're thinking in terms of reflections of past experience, and on the most subtle and deeply subconscious level, we are supported by the results of our past action, namely the storehouse conscious, alaya.

Next, Yangshan gives a concise rendition of the psychological teachings of this sutra: "That which thinks is the mind. That which is thought of is the environment. In that, there are such things as mountains, rivers, the great earth, towers and buildings, people, and animals." The Chinese compound for "that which thinks" is composed of a character that means "to think" and a character that designates an actor or activity. The compound for "thought of" is composed of a passive-marking character, together with the

character “to think.” So the Chinese here expresses active thinking and passive thinking. Active thinking is mind; passive thinking is the object. The objective world is the passive side of thinking, and the active side of thinking is what Yangshan refers to as the mind.

The character for “thinking” is also the character used to translate the Sanskrit word *cetana,* which is usually rendered into English as “volition” or “intention.” It is the overall tendency of the mind, which is Shakyamuni Buddha’s definition of *karma,* the definition of action. The character for “environment” in the above story could also be translated as “objects.” In “that which is thought of,” there are mountains, rivers, the great earth, towers and buildings, people and animals—in other words, the entire universe. “That which is thought of” is really just the mind in its passive, objective aspect.

Then Yangshan gives the monk the instruction we have been looking at: “Think back to the mind that thinks.” This could also be translated as: “Reverse your thought and think of the ability to think.” This is the basic instruction offered in the koan, and Yangshan follows it with a question: “Then is there something there?” Within Yangshan’s setup, this question leads us to realize liberation from entanglement with objects. In the context of turning the mind and thinking of the mind that thinks, the question opens to experiencing the world around us as nothing other than mind. In turning the mind this way, all our obsessions of body and mind drop away. We are all just one turning of the mind away from entering such a realm, the realm of suchness, the realm of cognition-only.

The monk follows this instruction thoroughly and answers Yangshan’s question by saying, “When I reach this realm, I don’t see anything at all.” He is not saying that there is nothing, but just that everything is mind. So he doesn’t see anything. There’s just mind. I don’t know how long he practiced these instructions before giving his answer. For some students, it may be a week, for others it may be years, and some may respond immediately and say, “When I reach this realm, I don’t see anything at all.”

In this first part of the story, the monk disengages himself from objects. He does not see the world as external, and his mind is undisturbed. This is the initiation into objectlessness. It is not that there are no externals; it is just that they are the mind appearing that way. Now that this monk has been doing this practice, now that he has got to this place, now that he is totally settled in this realm of objectlessness, it is as if there is nothing at all. This

is what happens when we look at the ability to think. When we look at the mind which is contemplated by any mind, we don't find anything. The mind contemplated by any mind is a nonconceptual image. As the story continues, Yangshan tells the monk: "This is good for the stage of faith." Or in other words, as Asanga said, you have faithfully done the practice of tranquillity, and by this practice of tranquillity you have entered the mind that doesn't find anything.

In practicing the instruction to turn the light around and shine it back, we make a transition from looking at objects and thinking about them to concentrating on the uninterrupted mind. This transition is potentially disorienting. In my experience, it can be nauseating. We are not used to looking at something, attending to something, without any way to reflect on it. We are not attending to just anything, but to a mind that is contemplated by any mind. The mind that is uninterrupted, undisturbed, untouched by images, the mind that no words can reach. This is so unlike our usual way of being, we can feel seasick here. What's more, when we try to get a hold on things, we find ourselves slipping away from the meditation itself back into a conceptual image of it.

The sutra says that in developing concentration, we attend to a nonconceptual object. When the sutra tells us about this, we receive the instruction conceptually, and we use this conceptual instruction to direct our mind to the nonconceptual object, which is the mind which is contemplated by any mind. This mind is a nonconceptual, uninterrupted mind. But although nothing can interrupt this mind, it can be transformed in three ways—into the alaya, into the manas, and into the sense consciousnesses. But what is the mind that is always there, through all these transformations, which no image can interrupt? That is the mind the sutra suggests we pay attention to in order to develop tranquillity.

Dogen Zenji reports that once he was talking to his teacher, Old Buddha Rujing, who told him that the practice of the buddhas and ancestors is to sit in the middle of the world of the suffering of all beings. By sitting with all beings, by opening to their suffering and listening to the cries of the world, there is the birth of what is called *nyushin* in Japanese, which means "supple, soft, or flexible mind." Then Dogen Zenji asked: "What is this supple mind?" Rujing said: "It's the willingness for body and mind to drop off." That is what I think is being suggested by this sutra and by these other great teachers. When you contemplate the undisturbed inner stream of the

meditating mind, you are opening to body and mind dropping off. Opening to that, you are opening to the light turning around and shining back onto the mind itself.

Dogen says, learn the backward step that turns your light inwardly to illuminate yourself, and body and mind of themselves will drop away, and your original face will manifest. What is your original face? It's a face that relinquishes any concept of face, so there is no way to carry any meaning about what your face is. That is your original face. The training in the tranquillity of the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra,* this Mahayana samatha, is to open to your face without any concept by which you can understand your face. Learning the backward step, this face manifests.

There is another example that comes from the early teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha: "Train yourself thus: in the seen, there will be just the seen." So you look at the floor and that's it. You give up any way to reflect on what the floor is. In the heard, there is just the heard; in the tasted, there is just the tasted; in the touched, there is just the touched; in the smelled, there is just the smelled. In any image, there is just the image. You are looking at an image with no way to conceptually reflect on it. This is the same as looking at the mind which is contemplated by any mind. If you can look at a color and in the color is just the color, then you may be able to tolerate looking at the mind that is just the mind. Next the buddha says: "When for you, in the seen there is just the seen, and in the heard there is just the heard, then you will not identify with them. You will not locate yourself in them. Then there will be no here, or there, or in between, and this will be the end of suffering." Now I would say, "This is your original face." You won't say, "That's my face" or "That's not my face." You'll give up any conceptual way to know which face is yours.

So this sutra says that in samatha training, what you are contemplating is mind. The mind has objects, but the objects are not different from mind. It is just that mind is generated in such a way that its objects look different from itself. But looking at all those different objects, you are always contemplating the same mind. It appears as different physical and mental phenomena; it even appears as different types of consciousness. You can say this is a good state of mind, and that is a difficult state of mind. Yet no matter what state of mind you are aware of, you are always contemplating the same mind. You may talk about it as having various colors, objects, or good and bad things, but it is really the same mind all the time. But what

about the mind that is always being contemplated? What is the inner stream, the light of the mind? What is the unconstructed mind? What mind is that? As the monk says to Yangshan, “When I get there, I don’t see anything at all.” When you look deeply at the mind, you don’t find anything. And being able to continuously attend to not being able to find anything is looking back at the mind. You can’t find people or horses, and you can’t find the mind. That’s what it’s like to look at the mind which is contemplated by any mind, and that is the tranquillity practice of this scripture.

“The original face will manifest” sounds pretty good. “Body and mind will drop away” sounds great. But that is not the end of the path. In the realm we are cultivating, there are no teachings. We used the teaching on samatha to generate physical and mental pliancy and to enter a realm of light and contemplate the inner stream of the meditating consciousness. This unconstructed stillness allows us to open to the mystery of dependent co-arising. And if we practice this way, we have a good state of mind to turn around and start looking at conceptual images. As the translation from the Tibetan makes clear, part of what a bodhisattva is interested in is expounding the teachings. Yet, in order to really expound the teachings, we have to eliminate any signs of substantial existence that have become associated with the teachings. We have to start looking at conceptual images again, and get back into having ways to get conceptual meaning, but then dismantle the whole thing.

Physical and Mental Pliancy

After describing how bodhisattvas mentally attend to the mind contemplated by any mind, the buddha goes on to tell us that: “The physical and mental pliancy that arises through engaging [in this practice] in this way and continuing in this [practice] is ‘samatha.’ This is how Bodhisattvas seek samatha.” (151) This continuous mental attention to contemplating the mind which is contemplated by any mind gives rise to a state of both physical and mental pliancy. According to this sutra, this pliancy is both the definition of samatha and essential to vipasyana: “‘Bhagavan, prior to attaining physical and mental pliancy, when a Bodhisattva inwardly attends to the mind observing the mind, what is this mental activity called?’ ‘Maitreya, this is not samatha. Know that it resembles intensified interest concordant with samatha.’” (153) This intensified interest is still appropriate to practice when this state of pliancy has not yet arisen, but it is not samatha.

The same is true for vipasyana. "'Bhagavan, prior to attaining physical and mental pliancy, when a Bodhisattva inwardly attends to those doctrines just as they have been contemplated as images that are the focus of samadhi, what is this mental activity called?' 'Maitreya, this is not vipasyana. Know that it resembles intensified interest concordant with vipasyana.'" (153)

The pliancy and flexibility, the ease of body and mind that arises from practicing in a correct way, is called *prasrabdhi* in Sanskrit. It is one of the ten virtuous mental factors in the Abhidharma of early Buddhism. It "refers to the fitness for action that freely applies the full energy of body and mind towards all good purposes." The ease of prasrabdhi comes from relaxing, and it removes all obstacles. Actually the passage says, "This ease comes from relaxing rigidity."[5] What kind of rigidity do we have to relax to produce this state of ease? The rigid adherence to the contemplation of conceptual objects. This calming meditation asks us to relax that rigidity, and not to constrict around the objects of mind, but to attend mind itself.

Asanga says, pliancy is supreme happiness and joy that is preceded by faith and clarity. What is the faith in this case? It is the faith that it would be a good idea to practice continuous mental attention to the mind which is contemplated by any mind. It is the faith that it would be good to continuously meditate on the inner stream of the meditating consciousness. According to Asanga, gradually making the mind joyful, pliancy eliminates the nonvirtuous class of errant tendencies.

When you are pliant, you are very awake and very relaxed. You are calm and full of energy. If somebody wants you to do something, or some big effort is necessary, you are ready: "Okay. Yes, ma'am, I am right here." Suzuki Roshi taught me the Japanese expression *Kashiko marimashita.* He told me that it was a humble and polite way to say, "Yes, I will do as you request." When I use that term, Japanese people always seem to say, "Oh, that is a good word." Roughly it means that I understand what you said and I will do as you say, or I understand what you requested and I am happy to do so immediately. If somebody asks you to do something, you can also say, *Hai,* in Japanese. Please go to the zendo: "Hai." Please clean the toilets: "Hai." That is good, too, and it also embodies the spirit of this pliancy. But "Kashiko marimashita" goes a little bit further. It is more like "I am right there with you, and I am totally for this good activity." Bodhisattvas don't say "Kashiko marimashita" for unkind deeds.

There is a famous story from Tibet of the great teacher Marpa telling his student Milarepa to build a tower. Then as soon as he gets done, Marpa tells him to tear it down and build another one. Whatever you are called upon to do, if you are flexible, then you can do it with your whole heart. If you are asked to build a tower, you can build a tower. If you are told to tear it down, you can do it with your whole heart. If something good needs to be done, there is no kind of hindrance to it, no stickiness. In the same way, when you give up excessive involvement with external objects, your mind is unblocked, and you enter the bodhisattva way. If you have been diligent in this practice, and someone suggests some wholesome activity, there is no blockage. Sometimes you can be diligent, and you really feel like "that would be good," but there is a little bit of a blockage in you, because you are still involved in objects. When you have no such involvements, the energy flows very clearly. The state that arises has a clear, bright, unhindered freedom and readiness for all kinds of wholesome activities. This state is the fruit of continuous mental attention to the mind which is contemplated by any mind.

Zen temples are places for such practice. Practitioners may be engaged in some work project, and before they get done, it is time to go to the meditation hall, and they just stop and turn their whole attention to sitting. When the bell rings, they give up their sitting, and they turn their whole attention to getting up and leaving the hall. I remember Suzuki Roshi saying, "Sometimes when I'm sitting, I feel that I can continue sitting forever. But when the bell rings, I get up and do *kinhin* [walking meditation]." I also remember in the early days at Tassajara, one of my friends was a very energetic worker. He asked Suzuki Roshi, "If we are working digging a ditch or something, and people are working slowly, what should we do?" Roshi answered, "You should slow down." Then somebody else asked, "What about in the kitchen? Suppose we have all these people cutting the vegetables really slowly, is the *tenzo* [head cook] supposed to slow down?" The word from the ancient master was, "Yes, the tenzo should slow down." Once you slow down and join them, then they can join you in speeding up and serving the meal on time.

There is a story of a Zen teacher who was trying to sleep, and above the ceiling over his bed, a rat was gnawing and scratching. Energetically rats are like moles and hummingbirds; they have a very high rate of metabolism. The teacher sped up his breathing to join the rat's breathing, and when he

united with the rat's breathing, then he started to slow back down to his normal breathing rate. The rat slowed down with him, and the rat fell asleep. Now they both could sleep.

A good t'ai chi teacher can do the movements very fast, but when she is teaching she slows way down so the students can join in her movements, and they can move together. Gradually the student and the teacher can move faster and faster. But first of all you unite. That is prasrabdhi. Even if you are not so skillful, if you work hard you can join the teacher's movements and flow together.

Giving up discursive thought is really difficult. But with great aspiration and diligence, this giving up can occur. Then, with flexibility, you can think with conviction: "I can change. I don't have to keep following these same old chains of thought. I am not going to push them away, but I am not getting involved with them either. I am going to find a new way." Prasrabdhi arises from learning this new way of relating to objects, a way of not getting excessively involved with them. Learning this, we can be flexible and let go of our old habits. We do this without fighting those habits, because if we fight them in our usual way, which many people do when trying to practice samatha, it actually makes them stronger. Then we are involved with an object of trying to give up involvement with objects, and that doesn't work. It just reinforces the old way. That sounds obvious, but we often just have to learn it by trial and error.

Besides ease or pliancy, prasrabdhi can also be glossed as freedom from subconscious conditioning. This kind of training, this attending to the mind contemplated by any mind, temporarily frees us from the subconscious support of the *alaya vijnana* of afflictive mental states. And when the afflictive influences of the alaya are suspended, prasrabdhi arises and we experience temporary relief from our predisposition toward making conventional designations. Then we can relax with our discursive thought.

After describing how the practice of samatha produces physical and mental pliancy, the sutra once again describes the shift from samatha to vipasyana: "Having obtained physical and mental pliancy, they abide in only that. . . . They analyze and inwardly consider those very doctrines in the way they have been contemplated as images that are the focus of samadhi. The differentiation, thorough differentiation, thorough investigation, thorough analysis, forbearance, interest, discrimination, view, and investigation of the objects that are known with respect to images that

are the focus of such samadhi is ‘vipasyana.’ This is how Bodhisattvas become skilled in vipasyana.” (151–53) Bodhisattvas generate pliancy and ease by attending to the uninterrupted mind. Then abiding in that samatha, that tranquillity, they turn to analyze, investigate, and inwardly consider the doctrines again. In other words, first they give up discursive thought until the dawning of the tranquil state. Then, either because of previous intention or because of the teacher’s instructions, their mind pivots and starts looking at the teachings again. But now they are looking at the teachings in a state of samadhi. They are looking at the teachings as they appear within tranquillity. They thoroughly differentiate, they thoroughly investigate, they thoroughly analyze these objects as they appear in the state of tranquillity. This is how the bodhisattvas are skilled in vipasyana.

Now this analysis and investigation is done in a new context, in the context of samatha. Now we listen to and reflect upon teachings that we have received and studied before we realized samatha. In the technical language of the sutra, the two mental factors that were given up in the process of training in tranquillity—namely, application of thought and discursive thought (*vitarka* and *vicara*)—are now picked up again and used in receiving and investigating the teachings. In this context, the first two levels of vipasyana (insight arisen by hearing and insight arisen by reflection) arise. When the practice of samatha and vipasyana are united, the understanding of buddha’s teachings enters and becomes one with our tranquil body-mind. This is the third and most profound level of insight. This is called insight that arises through meditation wherein samatha and vipasyana are united.

The bodhisattva Maitreya goes on to ask the buddha: “Bhagavan, are the path of samatha and the path of vipasyana ‘different’ or ‘not different?’” And the buddha says: “Maitreya, although they are not different, they are also not the same. Why are they not different? Because [samatha] observes the mind, which is [also] the object of observation of vipasyana. Why are they not the same? Because [vipasyana] observes a conceptual image.” (153) They both are looking at mind, so in that way their path is the same. But they are different in that one is giving up discursive thought when it studies mind, and the other is using discursive thought to study the mind. So one is looking at nonconceptual mind, looking at the ability to generate concepts, not at the concepts themselves. The other is looking at the mental concepts themselves. You might say, one looks at concepts, and the other

looks at the system for generating concepts. The first comes to fruit as bright, tranquil flexibility, and the second comes to fruit as the various levels of insight.

The Teaching of Mind-Only

Now we come to the pivotal teaching of this chapter, the doctrine of mind-only. In the middle of the discussion of the nature of tranquillity and insight, Maitreya asks: "Bhagavan, what is the image, the focus of samadhi which perceives [an image]?" In other words, what is the image that is the focus of this tranquil state? "Is it 'different from the mind' or is it 'not different?'" The buddha answers: "Maitreya, it is 'not different.' Why is it not different? Because that image is simply cognition-only." What cognition perceives is just cognition. It is mind perceiving mind. "Maitreya, I have explained that consciousness is fully distinguished by [the fact that its] object of observation is cognition-only." (153–55) The objects of consciousness are only manifestations of consciousness. They're mind appearing as images. They're not different from mind because these images, all images, are only consciousness. So here is the teaching of mind-only, the teaching of the intimacy where we live, the intimacy of mind and objects. But even though we live in this intimacy, we may not realize it.

All that this sutra has taught us about mind has prepared us to understand how it could be that the objects of mind are only cognition. It shows us how what we are aware of right now is only our mind. It seems that the first appearance of the teaching of cognition-only in this explicit form is right here in this chapter of the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra.*

Maitreya follows up with another important question. "Bhagavan, if that image, the focus of samadhi, is not different from the physical mind, how does the mind itself investigate the mind itself?" If the image that is the focus of this tranquil state is just the mind, how is this meditative investigation to proceed? The buddha replies: "Maitreya, although no phenomenon apprehends any other phenomenon, nevertheless, the mind that is generated in that way appears in that way." (155) Mind is generated in a way that it appears that one thing, the mind, apprehends another thing, its object. That is the kind of minds we have: minds that appear to apprehend something other than themselves. But although it appears that one phenomenon apprehends another phenomenon, the apprehender and the apprehended are both just one mind.

So how does mind see mind? There is really nothing at all seeing anything at all. “Maitreya, for instance, based on form, form itself is seen in a perfectly clear round mirror, but one thinks, ‘I see an image.’ The form and the appearance of the image appear as different factualities. Likewise, the mind that is generated in that way and the focus of samadhi known as the ‘image’ also appear to be separate factualities.” (155) This is a teaching that bodhisattvas hear well, listen to well, consider well, memorize well. Once they have done that, they have a chance to realize great wisdom. But please remember that all this is based on the bodhisattva practices of generosity, ethical discipline, patience, enthusiasm, and tranquillity.

Maitreya asks again, “‘Bhagavan, are the appearances of forms of sentient beings and so forth, which abide in the nature of images of mind, ‘not different’ from mind?’ The Bhagavan replied: ‘Maitreya, they are “not different.” However, because childish beings with distorted understanding do not recognize these images as cognition-only, just as they are in reality, they misconstrue them.’” (155) Speaking of childish beings might seem harsh. After all, it takes a great deal of training to not misconstrue images. Even if we have heard the teaching and deeply appreciate it, we may still not remember and be mindful of it. In this way, we are childish beings some of the time. We are not mindful and don’t realize that what we’re aware of is just our cognitive version of reality. You are not my cognitive version of you. If I stop cognizing you, you don’t evaporate. But all I know about you is my mind. My mind arises in dependence upon you, but what I see as you is just cognition. And being a childish being, it’s possible I’ll forget this teaching and think that the image I have of you is separate from my mind.

The buddha says the mind is generated in such a way that it arises with objects. But we should be clear that it isn’t that the mind makes its objects. That would be as if mind and the constructions were two things. They are one thing. It’s a constructing mind that arises, and the proof that it’s a constructing mind is that it has constructions. Mind does not construct something other than itself. We live in the intimacy of our constructing mind. This sutra is the revelation of this deep intimacy. We live in a mind that is generated in such a way that it appears to be knowing something other than itself. We are also given the gift of a mind that knows itself, a mind that is perceiving itself. If we can understand this, we understand suchness. We understand the way we really are. Meditating on this

suchness, the bodhisattva moves forward on the path of realizing supreme perfect enlightenment.

Maitreya goes on to ask, "'Bhagavan, at what point do those Bodhisattvas solely cultivate [the practice of] vipasyana?' The Bhagavan replied: 'When they attend to mental signs with continuous mental attention.'" (155–57) "Attend to mental signs" means, as mentioned earlier, thoroughly investigating and analyzing these signs, these appearances. You're watching the way the mind is generated such that it makes appearances out of phenomena. Sentient beings, mountains, rivers, trees, and the great earth are not appearances. A tree is not an appearance. You are not an appearance. But sentient beings' minds are generated in such a way that they make phenomena into appearances. Minds project mental patterns upon phenomena. They put signs on phenomena. Minds put signs on phenomena so that minds can grasp something. They can't grasp the phenomena outside the mind, but they can grasp the phenomena in the mind if they wrap the phenomena in signs. We use signs both to grasp the world and also to distract ourselves from the world. We both get access to the world and distract ourselves from the world by generating signs of the world. Vipasyana is to watch these appearances, to be aware of the packaging, to be aware of the signs that the mind puts on everything. And with the aid of this teaching of cognition-only, vipasyana learns to abandon the signs of phenomena.

"'At what point do they solely cultivate samatha?' The Bhagavan replied: 'When they attend to the uninterrupted mind with continuous mental attention.'" (157) In other words, when they attend to the nonconceptual image. The nonconceptual image is uninterrupted mind, uninterrupted stillness in the midst of all the changes. That is the object of observation for developing tranquillity. And when they attend just to that with continuous attention, they're developing tranquillity. Many people think of concentration as focusing on an image or an idea. This sutra says that focusing on images or ideas is not going to come to fruit as concentration. It is actually giving up discourse with images and focusing on mind that calms and tranquilizes body and mind.

Then Maitreya asks: "At what point, having combined the two, samatha and vipasyana, do they unite them?" Combining them means to do one, then the other, and then do them at the same time. Now the question is at what point, having combined them, are they actually united? "The

Bhagavan replied: ‘When they mentally attend to the one-pointed mind.’” (157) The buddha says they’re united when you mentally attend to the one-pointed mind. When they’re not united, the practice on one side is to attend to the mind itself, the uninterrupted mind, and the other practice is to attend to the mind’s images. Now, instead of attending to two aspects of mind, you attend to the one-pointed mind. When you do that, the practices are united.

Then Maitreya probes more deeply and asks: “What are mental signs?” And the buddha says, “Maitreya, they are the conceptual images that are the focus of samadhi, the objects of observation of vipasyana.” “‘What is an uninterrupted mind?’ ‘Maitreya, it is a mind that observes the image, the object of observation of samatha.’” (157) So the mind that observes the image is the uninterrupted mind. The uninterrupted mind is the nonconceptual object that is observed in samatha. When you give up involvement with conceptual objects, we can observe the uninterrupted mind.

Finally Maitreya asks, “What is the one-pointed mind?” And the buddha replies: “It is the realization that: ‘This image which is the focus of samadhi is cognition-only.’ Having realized that, it is mental attention to suchness.’” (157) That’s the punch line of the sutra. The previous three chapters all work together to help you understand what it means. Instead of “suchness,” we could also call it mental attention to the thoroughly established character, or mental attention to the ultimate lack of own-being.

One-pointed mind is a realization. It is a samadhi that is a realization. You’ve just heard the teaching of mind-only. You’ve heard the teaching that the mind is generated in such a way that everything it knows is just consciousness. When the mind realizes one-pointed-ness, and tranquillity and insight are united, there is a realization of that teaching. There is a realization that the object you’re looking at in tranquillity is just consciousness. That realization is attending to suchness, and attending to suchness is what frees us from the packaging, the signs that the mind puts on the world. The one-pointed mind is the realization that mind and the objects of mind are the same thing, not separate things. It is the realization that consciousness always arises having objects, and objects always arise being mind. This realization is the one-pointed mind, and that one-pointed mind observes suchness.

This is the realization of consciousness-only. This is the entrance into suchness, which is the deep intimacy of mind. If anybody or anything looks

external to you, and you enter into this one-pointed mind with that sign of externality, you can become free of that sign of the external. You can be at peace with this sign. Another way to say it is that you can abandon it, you can give it away. If you can give away the appearance of externality in what's appearing in mind, you're free of it. The founder of the Yogacara school says that when we give away this sign of externality, all unwholesome minds are pacified, and we enter the Middle Way.

There are many other teachings you can contemplate in this same way, and every time you contemplate a teaching and realize that the image of that teaching is just a conscious construction of the teaching, then you realize the teaching of consciousness-only. You attain the state of consciousness-only, and you understand the suchness of the teaching—not the appearance of the teaching by which you grasped it, but its true suchness. This teaching is a key for understanding all teachings, so that all teachings stop being external to you, and you enter their suchness through the suchness of consciousness-only. Many great sutras were written before this one. This sutra is offered to help us understand correctly all the other sutras. Here is the third turning of the wheel to help us understand the first two turnings of the wheel. This teaching also helps us understand the other teachings in this sutra, like the teachings of the *dharmakaya,* which will come up in the final chapter. It tells you how to study the mind, how to calm down and meditate on it, and how to look at the images within mind and attain freedom from images.

Suchness and Emptiness

The union of samatha and vipasyana realizes emptiness. Emptiness in this case is the emptiness of separation between mind and object. It's the insubstantiality of the appearance of separation between ourselves and other beings. It's the insubstantiality of the appearance that our feelings or our memories are separate from our consciousness. There is an appearance, but that appearance is completely insubstantial. It's just a mental fabrication. This is one type of emptiness that this scripture teaches, the emptiness of separation, the insubstantiality of separation between self and other, mind and object. We have already said that the union of insight and tranquillity is the one-pointed mind, the realization of cognition-only. The realization of cognition-only is mental attention to suchness. This is also mental attention to emptiness.

When you actually understand mind-only, you are attending to emptiness and suchness. But suchness emphasizes the way things are, and emptiness emphasizes the way they are not. The way phenomena are is cognition-only, and the way they are not is how they appear substantially. Suchness is more affirming, and emptiness is more refuting. Suchness and emptiness are both ultimate truth, but they are subtly different expressions of it. When this teaching of mind-only is realized, it opens onto the ultimate truth, which has various names, like dharmakaya, suchness, and emptiness. The true body of buddha, the dharmakaya, is suchness. The true body of buddha is emptiness. The Chinese character that was used to translate *sunyata,* emptiness, means "space" but the character looks like a drawing of a human body. It has a head, shoulders, ribs, hips, legs, and feet. There's a danger in understanding emptiness in a nihilistic way. I think the Chinese were wise in choosing that character to combat a nihilistic interpretation of emptiness and help us be calm, compassionate, and free. The character conveys embodied spaciousness.

Wisdom: Attending to and Freedom from Signs

Maitreya goes on to ask the buddha, "After Bodhisattvas have achieved samatha and vipasyana, how do they completely and perfectly realize unsurpassed enlightenment?" (201) The buddha responds by saying that bodhisattvas realize enlightenment by inwardly attending to suchness, and thereby entering great equipoise and freedom with regard to the signs of all phenomena. That they mentally attend to suchness means that they mentally attend to this teaching of mind-only in the widest possible sense.

When we are mentally one-pointed, there's a realization that the totality of phenomena are mind-only. This is the realization of the suchness of all phenomena, and this realization removes the signs of phenomena. So all phenomena are opportunities for observing and attending to the suchness of phenomena. When we see something and we remember the teaching that what we're looking at is just cognition, then we're attending to suchness. When we apply this teaching over and over and attend to suchness, the buddha says, "The mind soon enters great equipoise with regard to any arising of even the most subtle signs." (203) The mind enters equipoise and freedom with regard to all signs—the signs of separation, the signs of individuality, the sign that this person is different from that person, and the sign that this person is this way and another person is that way—the signs of the totality of phenomena. All the traditional teachings have signs on

them. Our vows have signs on them. When the signs of the totality of phenomena (which include all the traditional teachings) are objects of observation of the one-pointed mind, we are mentally attending to suchness. There is freedom from the signs of the totality of phenomena, and the doors of liberation open.

When we are set free from the way we sign and package the world, we are also free from believing in that packaging. For example, some people look across the room and say, "Those are my friends," and other people look across the room and say, "Those are my enemies," and both of them think that their packaging, the signs they put on those people, are actually the people. But the signs they put on them, friends and enemies, are really just cognition. Without realizing that, it's hard not be disturbed, hassled, and afflicted by the signed phenomena. Signed phenomena, phenomena that have been made graspable, afflict us and agitate us. We may not be able to stop our mind from signing phenomena, but with the aid of this teaching of mind-only, the signed phenomena won't disturb us. In other words, we can become calm, compassionate, and free with signed phenomena, even while the mind continues to do the packaging.

As is taught in the final chapter of the sutra, sentient beings strongly adhere to elaboration. Therefore, there is usually elaboration within cognition. But if we pay calm attention to the elaborations, we can sometimes realize a way of being in which there isn't any elaboration. In tranquil observation, you may look at something arising and see that the image is an elaboration of the way things are. If you're calm with that and realize that it is consciousness only, then the elaboration is pacified. Even if you have lots of signed phenomena flowing around, there is a mind that can observe them and be free of them. There is a mind that can say, "This is cognition-only," and understand the phenomena beyond their packaging. A lot of people are free of other people's packaging of phenomena, or of their own past packaging of phenomena, but not many people are free of their present packaging, their own story of what's going on. But if we can practice tranquillity and apply insight to this teaching, we can become free of the roots of all affliction.

The first teaching of the buddha was the teaching of the truth of suffering. Now we understand that the truth of suffering, its suchness, is that it's nothing but a manifestation of consciousness. And the truth of the origin of suffering is that it is a manifestation of consciousness, and the

same for the truth of cessation and the truth of the path. The sutra goes into seven kinds of suchness, and four of the seven kinds are the four noble truths. So those four noble truths are four suchnesses, which the bodhisattvas study in order to be perfectly enlightened. To study these truths, to understand the way they're taught, and then to see their suchness is the bodhisattva practice. The teaching and reality of the truth of suffering —as you're studying it, as you learn about it, as you're meeting it in this present moment—is none other than a manifestation of your consciousness. When you know this, you become intimate with the reality of that teaching, and the teaching, the dharma, does its work.

As the result of this practice, you will ultimately enter and realize the realm where there is no elaboration, no signs. You don't see images of things arising and ceasing. You don't see fabrications of existence and nonexistence. This is the realm where you have unlimited power to help living beings. You're not committed to existence, so you can relate to nonexistence. You're not committed to nonexistence, so you can relate to existence. You're not involved with these fabrications, so there's no hindering of the emanation of suchness. You come into the realm of fabrication united with the emanation of suchness to help people who live there. There's an image of Dharmakaya Vairochana Buddha sitting on a thousand-petal lotus throne, and on each petal sits a Shakyamuni Buddha. All these emanation buddhas are appearing in realms where people are into fabrication, so they can teach people how to become free of fabrication, while they're still seeing fabrication. But the source of this freedom from fabrication is a realm where there really isn't any fabrication, just unconstructed stillness.

What's the correct way to relate to fabrication? "This is just fabrication, just cognitive fabrication." And relating to that teaching in an unmoving, calm state, we become free of our current fabrication, and we enter suchness, which sets us up to meet and be free of all fabrication. This leads to the totally unhindered state of helpfulness called the dharma body, where there's no fabrication, just unconstructed stillness with all the great activities and all the great constructions swirling around within it.

As the sutra teaches in the final chapter, buddha's cognition is totally pure, without any elaboration. It doesn't fabricate any elaboration. Looking at you and taking care of you without elaborating you into existence or nonexistence is buddha. Buddha is being totally intimate with you without

making signs so she can grasp you. Buddha is taking good care of you, and taking good care of you is buddha. Buddha is telling me to take care of you, even though I may be putting signs on you. Buddha is also telling me, "Please be aware you're putting signs on her," and I say, "Yes ma'am."

So cognition-only is a teaching for sentient beings. Bodhisattvas are sentient beings—top-of-the-line sentient beings, but sentient beings nonetheless. This teaching is for them, for people who want to realize buddhahood for the welfare of all beings. Buddhas have given this teaching to help sentient beings become buddhas.

Buddhas have given this teaching, but this teaching is not for buddhas. Because they have already realized this teaching, they have a different kind of cognition; they have buddha cognition, which is unfabricated: no signing, no enclosing, no grasping, no distraction from the world by making it into something that they can use. They're devoted to all beings, and they teach all beings, and this is one of their teachings. Even great bodhisattvas are still working with cognition-only. They're still in the trenches working with signs, but they're free of them and relaxed with them. Buddhas live in a realm completely free of signs, and they emanate beings to help us deal with signs skillfully and enter the buddha realm.

The Bodhisattva Surfer

I often use the image of surfing, surfing the ocean of mind. It's not so much that you try to make the mind-ocean smooth, although sometimes the mind-ocean can become flat due to some kind of deep yogic concentration practice. What I'm concerned about is being upright and relaxed with the movement of the mind, so you are able to ride the fluctuations with complete stillness and balance, like a skillful surfer. The skillful surfers are interacting with forces of nature that are constantly changing and challenging their balance, and yet they find equanimity in the impermanent flux of their mind and body in relationship to its environment. There is stillness, there is imperturbability, in the midst of constant change. The question is, in the midst of such great flux, with the water splashing and the waves flowing all around you, can you remember the teaching that this is just mind looking at mind? To understand the teaching in the midst of the waves is different from understanding the teaching in a classroom. To remember the teaching under those conditions requires both the teachings and tranquil concentration.

Some disciples of buddha say you don't have to practice tranquillity, you can go directly to insight work. But I would say that only works for people who are already concentrated. Other people think you have to get rid of all the movement, all discourse. But the bodhisattva way is to find stillness in the world of the great white wave. We don't deny the world of apparent flux; we try to find the stillness there, like a surfer. In the flow of the inside and the flow of the outside, we gently attend to the intimacy of the stillness. We find balance in the tumultuous seas of mind. Then we see if we can pick up the sutra and start studying the scriptures while we're balanced on the surfboard. These scriptures will bring up a new kind of turbulence, a new test to see if we can settle into the stillness again. If we can, then we can realize the teaching that mind is characterized by being cognition-only. Realizing that, we become free of the way the mind is tricked and entrapped by itself.

In the equanimity that is realized when tranquillity is united with this understanding, there is no grasping. Prior to buddhahood, however, due to past karma, there are still signs on every little particle of water splashing on your face. If you continue to practice this way, all that gets cleared away, so that not only is there no grasping now, but there's no way to grasp ever again. When bodhisattvas see suchness, then they can really start to work on the buddha way. Bodhisattvas realize the suchness of mind-only and then start the long training program of using the attention to suchness in relationship to all the waves that are coming to them. In that way, they purify and pacify the entire ocean.

It's not that there's no more imputation in this process of bodhisattva training. It's just that whenever a phenomenon arises with an imputation, we bring the teaching to it. And then we're free of it, at least for the moment. When you impute things to phenomena, this is the source of affliction. This practice is to get to a state of tranquillity even while the mind is still doing things that are fostering the afflictive process. When we're calm within the afflictive process, the next step is to apply this teaching, and then everything actually starts to be cleansed. Because of past unskillfulness, afflictive states are still appearing to us, but now we have a way to deal with them that will lead to complete freedom from them.

Even if a thought of ill will arises in the mind of the surfer, she doesn't get distracted by it; she stays balanced. If a mind of lust arises in her, her concentration fully encounters and pacifies it. No matter how lovely the

observers on the beach are, the surfer is not distracted. Such a tranquil and wise surfer can ride the agitated seas of affliction and practice compassion toward all beings.

If there's agitation in the mind and the mind is tranquil with it, the mind is tranquil. If there's tranquillity in the mind and you're agitated with it, the mind is agitated. The way we work with objects is important. The object can be agitation, but there can be kindness, stillness, and tranquillity with anything, including agitation. So this tranquil person can go into an agitated sea and practice compassion toward the agitations.

If you get knocked off the surfboard, you're in the water, swimming for dear life. If you're getting bumped on the head by the surfboard and a lot of ill will is coming up, then you have to cool those afflictions with giving, ethical discipline, patience, and the aspiration to get back on the surfboard. Then when you're ready, you can diligently climb back on the surfboard, find upright stillness again, and practice the wondrous wisdom of suchness. This is the heart of bodhisattvas' yoga practice as taught in the sutra and the way to realize intimacy with all beings, which is unsurpassed, perfect enlightenment.

chapter eight

THE TEN STAGES AND THE SIX PERFECTIONS

IN THE TRANSLATION of this scripture from the Tibetan, the ninth chapter is called "The Questions of Avalokitesvara." But at the end of that chapter, Avalokitesvara bodhisattva asks the buddha what this discourse should be called, and the buddha says, "the teaching of the definitive meaning of the stages and the perfections." (271)

The questions of Avalokitesvara unfurl the profound and wondrous workings in the training of the bodhisattvas and the enlightenment of the buddhas. The stillness of meditation both realizes and expresses the oneness of this training and enlightenment. Therefore, in the buddha way, we practice stillness, together with all buddhas and bodhisattvas. In this chapter of the sutra, the dynamic working of the practice of stillness is analyzed in great detail. But before entering this analytic process, it may be good to be aware that later in the chapter the buddha teaches that all these various practices have only one mode.

The Zen ancestors make the same point. The forty-second ancestor in the lineage to which I formally pay homage was named Liangshan. He studied with Tong-an. Once Tong-an asked him, "What is the business beneath the patched robe?" Liang-shan made no answer. Tong-an said, "Studying the buddha way and still not reaching this realm is most miserable. Now you ask me." So Liang-shan asked him, "What is the business beneath the patched robe?" Tong-an said, "Intimacy." Liang-shan realized intimacy with his teacher—that is to say, they were both greatly enlightened. This intimacy is the business of the buddha mind that lives under the patched robe of our authentic ancestors. This chapter describes the marvelous process of practice that is going on under the robes worn by buddhas and bodhisattvas.

The teachings of this chapter are really a seamless whole, but they appear to be in the form of teachings of division and analysis. These are teachings that divide, analyze, and subdivide the one mind of buddha in order to realize the one mind of buddha. In our practice we start with stillness, but it isn't a static, dead stillness. Within this stillness there is tremendous activity. The stillness we practice, the stillness of being ourselves, is fully alive, and within it are all the enlightening activities of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. When we come to this practice of simply being ourselves in stillness, and we hear such analytic teachings, we may feel that they will

disturb the unity and nonduality of simply being ourselves. We may fear that the beauty of the buddha and the dharma will be disturbed by lists and details. But this type of teaching is given to help us understand the dynamism within the beautiful stillness and silence of the buddhas.

Throughout this chapter, the bodhisattva, the great being, Avalokitesvara is in conversation with the buddha. Avalokitesvara asks many questions for the welfare, happiness, and benefit of all beings. Here, I would like to focus on just a few particular questions that I think will help illuminate the process of enlightenment that goes on when we practice being still and silent.

Dealing with Ignorance

In this analysis, there are ten bodhisattva stages and one buddha stage. Avalokitesvara asks the buddha how many types of ignorance or errant tendencies are encountered and dealt with within these ten stages. These questions lead to a lovely discourse on the different types of ignorance. The main thing it shows is that the bodhisattva passes through stages of evolution, and certain basic problems have to be taken care of before other more subtle and advanced problems can be dealt with fruitfully. There is an order and structure to the evolution of the practice, and all this is going on in the stillness of simply being oneself.

The reason the buddha mind is being analytically divided into different dimensions or areas of concern is that there are different types of ignorance. Because there are these different types of ignorance, there are different practices to deal with them and different stages of the path. These ignorances are necessarily dealt with in a certain order. You can't deal with the ignorance of the tenth stage at the first stage. You have grosser ignorances to deal with first. And when you hear about them or read about them, you realize that even the grosser ignorances may take a long time to cure. However, this is in the realm of bodhisattva practice, so we accept this difficulty because dealing with ignorance is our course of study. This chapter tells us that we've got basically twenty-two types of ignorance to deal with, and it's good to start with type one first.

Practice is not linear, but there is linearity within it. Stillness isn't linear. You-being-you isn't really linear, and it isn't really nonlinear. But you-being-you allows linear and nonlinear perspectives. We are sentient beings, and we live in a world that includes both linear and nonlinear. That's our

life. Part of what happens when you become yourself is that you allow all of this to be.

When you sand a wooden table, it's okay to start with really fine sandpaper, but that might not work out very well. If you start with rough sandpaper, you can smooth out the gross roughness more quickly. However, as you smooth it out, you notice that there are scratches that you couldn't see before. Then you use a finer sandpaper. And with finer sandpaper, you see even finer scratches. Then you use even finer sandpaper, and the finer the sandpaper you use, the more subtle are the scratches you discover. You could start with fine sandpaper and just keep sanding and sanding, and you might eventually reach the same result, but you might not.

Similarly, you can't find the most subtle attachments, the most subtle ignorances, until you deal with the grosser ones. When you deal with the grosser attachments, your reward is "Oh, great! Now I see new problems I didn't even know I had." Then you take care of those problems, and your reward is to find another whole set of problems you didn't know you had. By taking care of your problems, you keep getting rewarded with awareness of more problems. But there is an end. It's possible to finally get down to the most subtle attachments and ignorance.

We may see a kind of linearity in this process, but the idea that linearity is a reality is another kind of ignorance. It's not really linear, because there's no own-being to linear, and there's no own-being to nonlinear. There's no own-being to the path, to the evolution of the bodhisattva. There's no essence to any of it. But there's a linear progression in getting into the different layers of our belief that there is an essence.

It may seem strange that in this bodhisattva career we need to be trained to be ourselves. But in the realm of just sitting, in the realm of just being still and learning to be yourself, the process of learning to be yourself involves innumerable practices, innumerable ways of training yourself to be yourself. Of course, we are ourselves already. Yet we need to train to be ourselves, and we don't understand that without performing many kinds of practices. All the practices are about the same thing: studying the self, becoming thoroughly yourself, and being relieved of all attachment to yourself.

The Six Perfections

Perhaps the most central question that Avalokitesvara asks in this chapter is, What are the basic types of training? What are the basic types of practice?

What are the basic precepts? The buddha says there are six basic precepts for bodhisattvas, six basic kinds of training. Of course, there are innumerable kinds of training, but they are all included under six headings: giving, ethical discipline, patience, enthusiasm, concentration, and wisdom. All the practices of bodhisattvas fall under those categories. In Sanskrit, these basic types of training are called *paramitas,* which means "going beyond," "that which goes beyond," or "transcendence." So there are six kinds of practices that go beyond themselves, that don't attach even to themselves. In their fullness, they constantly transcend themselves, therefore they are called transcendent practices, or perfections.

The great bodhisattva Avalokitesvara further asks about four additional perfections that the buddha also taught. And the buddha says the additional four are actually already included in the first six. The additional four perfections—skill in means, power, vow, and knowledge—assist the basic six. The first three perfections of giving, ethical discipline, and patience are all transcendent ethics, and the perfection of skill in means assists those first three. The perfection of power assists the perfection of meditation, the perfections of vow assists the perfection of enthusiasm, and the perfection of knowledge assists the perfection of wisdom.

Knowledge is not necessarily something that is possessed by an individual. It is something that exists in the world. Knowledge that can assist the continual process of wisdom going beyond itself is nonconceptual. It is the fruit of wisdom, and it assists in the ongoing development of wisdom. In this way, wisdom nourishes itself. Thus, the tenth perfection nourishes the sixth perfection. The sixth perfection is really the center of all the perfections, the center of the whole bodhisattva practice. The other five are really unfoldings of the perfection of wisdom, and the last four all assist the basic six.

The information that you're given as a result of wisdom contributes to the evolution of wisdom. Knowing that you shouldn't get stuck in wisdom is something you find out when you're wise. But you can find it out before you're wise, too. This teaching from the buddha tells you right now that holding on to wisdom is antithetical to wisdom. It helps wisdom not get stuck in itself. It helps wisdom continue to go beyond wisdom.

Some teachings of the buddha that are given to us in the form of knowledge help us to develop wisdom, and they are included in wisdom. Such teachings, such knowledge, and such information are nonconceptual.

You may know them conceptually, but they are non-conceptual. And this wisdom is nonconceptual, too. It's more like the process by which you know that things are innocent of conception. It's the breaking through to how things are not reached by words. Like the knowledge that apprehends the lack of own-being, words do not know it, and words do not teach you how to get there. But words are part of the process, so the buddha uses words to teach wisdom.

Next, Avalokitesvara asks how many kinds of each of the six perfections there are, and buddha says there are three kinds of each, and each of those has three aspects. So there are three times three times six, which is fifty-four—fifty-four aspects of the dynamic bodhisattva practice that lives in authentic stillness. For example, the three kinds of giving are giving of material things, giving of the dharma, and giving of fearlessness. The three aspects of material gifts are giving what is good, what is clean, and what is suitable. The three aspects of giving dharma involve offering teaching nonerroneously, offering teaching logically, and offering teaching that encourages others to take up the bodhisattva precepts of training. The gift of fearlessness consists of demonstrating equanimity in the midst of a variety of anxieties, and its three aspects are protection from conditions of suffering, protection from loss of life, and protection from the bondage of birth and death.

Using this analysis, you can check out the enlightened mind at home. Just sit still and look inside and see how the paramitas are going. For example, are the three kinds of giving there, and do the three kinds of giving have three aspects? In this way, you can check out the bodhisattva mind of practice. And you will find, I think, that studying these analytic descriptions of the basic bodhisattva practices becomes a way to get to know yourself. It is a way to get to know your bodhisattva self.

But there are not just fifty-four aspects; there are boundless facets to the jewel of bodhisattva training. As we say in the four great bodhisattva vows, which are chanted in various translations in all Zen communities, "Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to learn and enter them." I want to know all the activities of enlightenment that are going on in me. These teachings help me to get to know the enlightenment that's living in me right now. They are a tour guide to your enlightened mind. How is it that when we sit still and silent there is material giving, giving of dharma, and giving of fearlessness? How is our body sitting still a material gift for the welfare of all beings?

How is our immobile sitting a gift of the dharma of the buddha ancestors? How is our just sitting and being ourselves giving the gift of the fearlessness of the buddhas and bodhisattvas for the protection of all life? If you turn the light around and look, you may be able to discover the answers to these questions living in the midst of the stillness of being yourself. Then you will see how wonderful these questions of Avalokitesvara really are.

Abiding in the Practices, Not the Results

I want to look at two more questions in some detail. The first concerns the way bodhisattvas practice the perfections. Avalokitesvara asks the buddha, "Bhagavan, why is it that Bodhisattvas do not abide through faith in the desirable fruitional results of the perfections in the same way that they abide in the perfections?" (259) Or as the Chinese translations put it, why is it that bodhisattvas deeply believe in these basic training methods, these paramitas, and pursue them with enthusiasm, rather than pursuing the pleasant fruits, the agreeable rewards, that result from them?

The buddha tells Avalokitesvara that there are five reasons bodhisattvas do not abide in the wondrous results of these practices but only in the practices themselves. First, it is the perfections, not the rewards, that are the cause of surpassingly great happiness and supreme joy and bliss. The rewards are not the cause of supreme great happiness; the practice is the cause. So bodhisattvas don't abide in the rewards. They abide in the practice without attachment to the practice, because these practices go beyond themselves. They abide in these practices by not abiding in them. Second, these practices are causes of benefit. They benefit oneself and others, and they are the cause of the ultimate benefit for everyone. Third, "they bring about desirable fruitional results in the future." Fourth, "they are the basis of non-affliction." Fifth, these practices "are unchangeable reality." (259–61) These practices are not things that ultimately change or perish.

As I understand Suzuki Roshi, our practice is just to be ourselves. How do we practice being ourselves? By practicing these six perfections free of any idea of gain. We are not trying to gain anything from being ourselves. Bodhisattvas are ordinary beings who practice being themselves for the welfare of others. They practice giving, ethical study, patience, heroic effort, concentration, and wisdom with enthusiasm. They are devoted to these practices, but they are not devoted to the good results these practices

bring. They don't abide in those good results; that's not what they are pursuing. Why? Because they are bodhisattvas.

These inconceivably wondrous practices are going on within stillness and silence. They are practices of immediate realization. You don't have to move to find them. They are going on in us right now. We can inwardly know them without words. Within stillness and silence there is a wondrous unconstructed practice activity. You-being-you is not constructed. You are constructed. I am constructed. But you-being-you and me-being-me is not constructed. We may feel we need a bit more explanation to understand this, but you-being-you will not be grasped by explanation. You cannot get at you-being-you. There's no way for you to construct you-being-you. You are constructed, you are compounded, you are fabricated. The fact of you-being-you is not fabricated.

The Practice that Apprehends the Lack of Own-Being

The second question that I want to look at closely concerns the perfection of wisdom. Avalokitesvara asks: "Bhagavan, with what perfection do Bodhisattvas apprehend the lack of own-being of phenomena?" Which of these perfections grasps the fact that all things have no essence? Which is the one that grasps the lack of inherent existence of all things, the one that grasps emptiness? The buddha answers, "Avalokitesvara, they apprehend this with the perfection of wisdom." (263)

The perfection of wisdom grasps the lack of own-being of all phenomena. Then Avalokitesvara asks: "Bhagavan, if they apprehend lack of own-being with the perfection of wisdom, why do they also not apprehend it with own-being?" In other words, is there an own-being, is there something that inherently exists that grasps the lack of inherent existence? Transcendental wisdom grasps that things have no essence. But is there an essence that grasps the lack of essence? Is there an own-being that grasps the lack of own-being? And the buddha says: "Avalokitesvara, I do not say that own-being apprehends what is without own-being. Yet, since lack of own-being is individually known without words, without being taught by words, I have spoken of 'apprehension of lack of own-being.'" (263) I never taught that an own-being grasps the lack of own-being. I don't say that there's something that grasps the lack of inherent existence. I say the perfection of wisdom grasps it, but I don't say perfection of wisdom is something, that it is an essence that grasps things.

What is it that grasps a lack of own-being? What is it that grasps the ultimate truth? The buddha calls it the perfection of wisdom. But this lack of own-being cannot be taught by these words or by any other words. It can be known inwardly; it can be grasped by wisdom. It is known without words, and it cannot be taught with words. Therefore, I use words to tell you that words will not reach it. When you look for it, when you look inwardly to find the ultimate truth, don't use words to try to know it. Only use words to send yourself into your training to be yourself.

The buddha did talk about a being that apprehends ultimate truth, a being that apprehends the lack of own-being of things. He called that being perfect wisdom. But when he is asked if what grasps the lack of own-being is itself an own-being, he says that he doesn't teach that. He doesn't teach that this being that grasps this wisdom, this wisdom-being that could be a bodhisattva or a buddha, is an own-being that grasps the lack of own-being. So buddha wouldn't teach that there's a god or a bodhisattva or a buddha that is an own-being that grasps the lack of own-being.

Wisdom is a being, otherwise it wouldn't exist. But it's not a being that has an own-being. It's not something that exists separately from you and me. *Sophia* is a Greek word for wisdom. Sophia is a very elusive creature. Wisdom exists, but you can't find her. You can't get ahold of her. She is ungraspable. But she who is ungraspable can grasp the fact that all things are ungraspable. She grasps by way of nongrasping. So she is a being, but she has no more own-being than the ungraspable things she understands.

The Heroic Bodhisattva

Now we have considered a few details of a wondrous story of bodhisattva training. This bodhisattva story is amazingly heroic—some might say it is a grandiose, impossible dream. The way you can bring this story down to earth is by having no gaining idea, just practicing for the love of practice, abiding in the practice by way of nonabiding. This is a key to this heroic bodhisattva story. Some may feel they need proof that there's somebody practicing this way. If you need proof, I hope it's given to you. Some people who are not sure they have really seen such a practitioner may still want to give the practice a try. Shakyamuni Buddha recommended that you open your mind to the possibility that there have been and are such people. Part of what Shakyamuni Buddha taught as right view is that there are beings who follow the path, just for the sake of the path, and realize authentic enlightenment. So may we open to the suggestion that it is possible? Even if

we haven't seen them, hearing their story, we may still want to be like them and realize what they are said to have realized.

I saw a movie once about King Arthur. After having pulled Excalibur out of the stone and establishing his splendid court with the round table of knights in shining armor, King Arthur still had some deeper psychological work to do. This work was called seeking the Grail. So here he is in the film, going through the filthy, sewage-polluted streets of a medieval town, dressed in rags with a few raggedy-taggedy knights still following him. He's wounded and limping through dark muddy passageways when he comes upon a peasant boy. He says, "Hello, young man." The boy says, "Hello, mister." King Arthur says, "What do you want to be when you're a man?" The boy says, "I want to be a knight like King Arthur." King Arthur says, "Why do you want to be a knight?" And the boy says, "Because of the stories they tell about them."

I want to live the bodhisattva ideal. I want to be a person who practices these six perfections in the stillness of being authentically myself. And the teaching tells me that right along with this ideal, right next to this great virtue, is nonvirtue, is lack of interest in virtue. They coexist. We have the aspiration to be this wonderful bodhisattva, along with being an imperfect human. The teaching and the aspiration here are given for the imperfect. We are imperfect people aspiring to complete, perfect, unsurpassed awakening for the welfare of all beings. We already know about imperfect people wishing to have supreme enlightenment for themselves. But how about imperfect people wishing for enlightenment for the welfare of others? It can happen that an imperfect person sincerely wishes to live this way. And if that person has some self-serving gaining idea, so be it—that's part of the imperfection. We can still aspire to the perfection of no-gaining simultaneously with having a gaining idea.

If you haven't seen anybody who's perfect, maybe that's okay. Maybe all you can see is people who are imperfect aspiring to perfection. Part of fruitfully aspiring to perfection is to be willing to be imperfect. To be really good, to be really genuine, at being imperfect is the bodhisattva way. By that I mean that being generous toward your imperfection, being ethical toward your imperfection, being patient with your imperfection, being enthusiastic about being generous, ethical, and patient with your imperfection, being calm with your imperfection, and being wise about your imperfection is the bodhisattva path of practice. This whole practice

leads to understanding that imperfection does not have an own-being, and neither does perfection. And such an understanding relieves all suffering and distress. You're not necessarily interested in being the perfect one, and you're not particularly interested in being the imperfect one. You'll be the imperfect one if that helps people, and if it helps people to be the perfect one, you'll be that way for a little while, too.

You can reflect inwardly and see for yourself whether such a path is commensurate with a tremendous joy at the opportunity of living this way, because such joy is part of this bodhisattva path. You must have great joy in order to thoroughly follow through on this amazing path.

During one of the first talks I heard Suzuki Roshi give, he said, "I'm not enlightened." And I thought, "Oh, oh, I left my life in Minnesota and came to San Francisco to study with this person, and now he tells us he's not enlightened." But then I thought, "He's still the best I've ever seen, and that's good enough for me." Then in his next talk, he said, "I'm buddha." And I thought, "That's more like it."

I'm not enlightened. I'm imperfect. I'm buddha. I'm joyful, and I'm also suffering. But I'm joyful that I can live joyfully in the midst of suffering, that I can be fearless in the midst of suffering, or at least not as afraid as I was before. Practicing this way, I'm encouraged, and I intend to continue. You are welcome to walk along with me. And as my teacher said, "If I walk too slowly, please go ahead. I've got your back."

chapter nine

THE DEEDS OF THE TATHAGATAS

THE TITLE OF this chapter in the Tibetan translation is "The Questions of Manjusri." But at the end of this chapter, Manjusri asks the buddha what these teaching should be called, and the buddha says they should be called "the definitive instruction establishing the deeds of Tathagatas." (309) It might also be translated as "the definitive instruction on the establishment of the essential activity," or "the essential function of the buddhas." The deeds of the thoroughly enlightened is a profound topic, so profound that one might wonder what this has to do with our everyday life. If you are wondering that, I suggest the answer will come if you just hear these teachings while fully engaging body and mind.

Manjusri bodhisattva's name could be etymologized as "pleasant splendor," "soft glory" or "sweetness and light." Because his mind realizes the truth of suchness and is permanently peaceful, he is called pleasant, soft, or sweet. He is sweet to his enemies and to his friends. He is endowed with splendor because he is revered and worshipped by people of the world and even those far beyond the world. He is revered and worshipped by everyone. That's the meaning of splendor.

Some people would say that this bodhisattva is really a tathagata, a fully realized buddha, but in order to teach the buddha dharma, he appears in the form of a bodhisattva. We call him the Bodhisattva of Perfect Wisdom, and his statue is enshrined in the meditation halls of Zen temples throughout the world. He is strongly associated with the Perfect Wisdom scriptures. In fact, he is often one of the partners in the dialogues in those scriptures, and in this chapter, we have a story about Manjusri talking to the buddha about the buddhas.

The Dharmakaya of the Buddhas

This chapter of the sutra starts out with Manjusri asking the buddha, "Bhagavan, when you speak of 'the Dharmakaya of the Tathagatas,' Bhagavan, what are the characteristics of the Dharmakaya of the Tathagatas?" (275) What are the characteristics of the pure *dharmakaya? Dharma* can be translated many ways, but here it means reality, or truth. *Kaya* is "body." So the question is, What are the characteristics of the reality body of the buddha?

The buddha replies, "Manjusri, the characteristics of the Dharmakaya of the Tathagatas are the well-established transformation of the basis through

renunciation, the complete cultivation of the [ten] stages and the [six] perfections." (275) The basis here is the body-mind complex, the storehouse consciousness that lives in a body. Through training as a bodhisattva, this storehouse consciousness can become completely transformed from being the basis of delusion to being wisdom itself. According to this scripture, bodhisattva training transforms this consciousness.

The transformation of the basis is known as *asraya paravritti* in Sanskrit. The great ancestor Asanga, the cofounder of the Yogacara school, states that there are three types of asraya paravritti. One type is the transformation of mind, *citta asraya paravritti.* The second kind is the transformation of the basis of the path, *marga asraya paravritti.* And the third kind is the transformation of the basis of errant tendencies, *dausthulya asraya paravritti.* This basis is transformed by practicing the six perfections (giving, ethical discipline, patience, enthusiasm, concentration, and wisdom). Asanga comments that when well-established this transformation is the exalted wisdom of reality and suchness, and it is unerring and changeless.

The buddha goes on to say: "Moreover, know that this [Dharmakaya] has an inconceivable characteristic for two reasons: because it is free from elaborations and free from manifest activity; and because sentient beings very strongly adhere to elaborations and manifest activity." (275) When I read this part of the sutra, I always think of the time when a monk asked Dongshan, "What is buddha?" and Dongshan said, "Three pounds of hemp."[1] Here Dongshan speaks of the dharma body of the buddha, not the historical buddha. The hemp is free of all elaboration and manifest activity. It can respond appropriately to the needs of beings. For example, it can become clothing for a bodhisattva to wear. That the dharmakaya is free of elaborations means it's free of such things as arising and ceasing. Enlightenment is the essential functioning of the buddha, and this enlightenment is free of elaborations like arising and ceasing or coming and going.

In memorial ceremonies in the Zen tradition, such as our monthly memorial for Suzuki Roshi, we say, "In the dharma body there is no coming or going, no increase or decrease, no birth and death." We often say in Zen that birth and death is a truly great matter. Birth and death is a painful elaboration of reality. It is an all-pervasive affliction among the

unenlightened. So the world of misery is called birth and death, and the buddha realizes a body-mind that is free of such elaborations. It is also free of such elaborations as, This exists or doesn't exist, or This both exists and doesn't exist, or This neither exists nor doesn't exist. It's free of all elaborations and all manifest activity.

Manifest activities are activities that come and go, that arise and cease, that are mixed with perception, but not all activity is manifested activity. The reality of perception doesn't come and go, isn't born, and doesn't die. The dharma body is totally nonseparate from the realms of birth and death, and it is simultaneously free of all elaboration and manifest activity. That's one reason why this dharma body is characterized as inconceivable. The other reason is that we have trouble understanding something that doesn't come or go, that doesn't arise or cease, that doesn't have manifest activity. If we could conceive of what is without elaboration, then it wouldn't be inconceivable to us. But we strongly adhere to our elaborations. They're the way we usually relate to our experience. The more you're inclined toward elaboration, the more inconceivable this dharma body is.

Next Manjusri asks the buddha, "Is the transformation of the basis of Sravakas and Pratyekabuddhas also suitably referred to as 'Dharmakaya?'" In addition to buddhas and bodhisattvas, we have other kinds of sages, the disciples, or *sravakas,* who became enlightened by listening to the buddha, and the *pratyekabuddhas,* or solitary buddhas, who become enlightened on their own without hearing the buddha's teaching. The *arhats,* who are on the sravaka path, have also reached a way of living that's beyond training. They are enlightened beings; they understand the selflessness of living beings. For example, in the first scripture of our tradition, called *Turning the Dharma Wheel,* the buddha is talking to five disciples, and all five of them quite quickly become transformed, enlightened, and liberated. They all face north, bow to the buddha, and formally become his disciples. They all reach a stage beyond training. So Manjusri is asking if their transformation should be referred to as the dharmakaya. The buddha replies, "Manjusri, they are not spoken of [in this way]." So Manjusri asks him: "Bhagavan, in that case, what should they be called?" The buddha responds, "Manjusri, they are liberation bodies. Manjusri, in terms of liberation bodies, Tathagatas, Sravakas, and Pratyekabuddhas are similar and equal. In terms of the Dharmakaya, [Tathagatas] are superior. Since the Dharmakaya is superior, [Tathagatas] are also superior in terms of

immeasurably good qualities. It is not easy to provide examples of that." (275) It is not easy to provide examples of these unlimited good qualities because they cannot be grasped.

The liberation body of the arhats is equal to the liberation body of buddhas. Buddhas are free, and arhats are free. But the dharmakaya of the buddha is not like the transformation of the basis of these disciples. The buddha has immeasurably good qualities that they do not possess. It is not that they do not have good qualities, but they cannot be compared to the immeasurably good qualities of the dharmakaya. Nothing is remotely related to it.

A key point about the purity of the dharmakaya is made here. Because it's free of any kind of elaboration, because it doesn't get involved with coming and going, birth and death, existence and nonexistence, it is totally committed to the welfare of all beings. It is not only wonderful in the sense that it is the completion of all the bodhisattva practices. It is wonderful because it is so pure that it can respond in whatever way is appropriate to the welfare of beings. If you want to die, it can die with you. If you want to be born, it can be born with you. If you want to go, it can go with you. It doesn't really go; it emanates a manifestation in the form of going. This is called the transformation body of the buddha, the *nirmanakaya,* which we will discuss next. Because of the purity of the dharmakaya, it is so adaptable that it can be whatever will help beings.

Again we are taught in this chapter that the dharma body is the complete transformation of the storehouse consciousness, the *alaya vijnana.* It is the wondrous fruit of the authentic practice of the buddha way. It has been proposed from Shakyamuni Buddha on, and I now propose to you, that this fruit has already been realized by the ancient buddhas, and it is perfectly available for transmission to us now. This is the grace of the buddhas. Its presence is all pervading, but without authentic practice it is not realized.

The Transformation Body

The next part of the conversation is about this transformation body, or nirmanakaya. Manjusri asks, "Bhagavan, how should one know the characteristics of a Tathagata's genesis?" How should we know the birth of a tathagata? The buddha answers, "Manjusri, the characteristics of the Nirmanakaya are like the arising of worldly realms. You should see the characteristics of the Nirmanakaya as characteristics that are empowered by

all the types of adornments displaying the qualities of the Tathagatas which arise. The Dharmakaya has no genesis." (275–77)

What is the transformation body? That's another body of the buddha. *Nirmana* can be translated as "transformation," "magic," "illusion," or "phantom." The dharma body can be transformed into something that is born, that arises, that comes and goes. But the dharmakaya doesn't come and go. So Manjusri asks, "How should one view the skillful method that displays the Nirmanakaya?" And the buddha says: "Manjusri, view the skillful method that displays the Nirmanakaya as everywhere displaying the stages: entering the womb in a household of one renowned as sovereign in all the Buddha fields of the trichiliocosm or of one renowned as being worthy of gifts; taking birth; growing up; enjoying worldly pleasures; leaving home; fully demonstrating the practice of austerities all at once; renouncing them; and displaying the stages of complete, perfect enlightenment." (277)

The bodhisattva Gautama progressed through innumerable stages before he became Shakyamuni Buddha. The nirmanakaya manifests in the world through such stages. Sometimes Zen students don't like to hear about stages, because part of our inheritance is the teaching that the dharmakaya doesn't have stages, arisings, or ceasings. But the nirmanakaya, the transformation body, has those things. Part of buddha activity is this pure dharmakaya, which doesn't come or go and has no manifest activity. Another part of the buddha activity is to appear in display. So what the buddha is saying is that when the nirmanakaya appears, it appears displaying stages. Nirmanakaya can use any adornments of the buddha that would be helpful.

The stages presented in the text are based on the pattern of the historical buddha. His story is an example of how the buddha skillfully displays something for living beings to see. And what do we see? We see an entry into a womb in a woman's body in India in a household of one renowned as a sovereign. Even in the buddha fields, you could see this sovereign realm where his mother and father lived. The buddha body was transformed and entered the womb of this woman who lived in a palace, a palace that was revered in buddha lands throughout the cosmos. Then it took birth and grew up from a baby to a little boy to a big boy, then enjoyed worldly pleasures in the palace, and then left home. He fully demonstrated the practice of all austerities, and then he renounced those austerities and displayed the stages

of complete perfect enlightenment. This is an example of a transformation body of the buddha that is recorded in history as Shakyamuni Buddha's life story.

The Teachings of the Tathagatas

Manjusri then asks, "Bhagavan, through the Tathagatas' empowerment-body, Tathagatas mature trainees' immature constituents by expressing their teachings, and they teach mature beings in a liberative way by these objects of observation. How many expressions [of the teachings] are there?" (277) The tathagata's empowerment body helps trainees by expressing the teachings, and it teaches more mature beings by guiding them to observe these teachings in a liberative way. The tathagata's empowerment body initially helps trainees by expressing teachings, and it teaches more mature beings by guiding them.

The dharmakaya is not an individual. The pure body of buddha is free of elaborations like individual and group. The great teacher is not an individual but something that results from long training that transforms an individual into the realization of something that is not individual. But that great teacher can manifest in individual ways to help people who relate to individuals. The buddha is not something out there, and not something in here. It is actually a relationship. The relationship is ungraspable, but it offers the appearance of a separate individual so that people can relate to it and have an individual teacher. But the appearance of being an individual is an illusion. The transmission is not from individual to individual. It is the transmission of the actual relationship among all beings.

At the beginning of the chapter, we're told that the characteristics of the dharma body are the well-established transformation of the basis through renunciation. So the qualifications for this kind of realization are that an ordinary person practices renunciation by means of the six perfections, and that the practice develops over a long period of time. At one time, the person may be practicing the perfections in a monastery, sitting many hours a day, and at other times she may not. It takes a long time to develop these practices, but doing the practice, right now, wherever you are, at whatever level you're at, is the buddha way. There is no other buddha way than our practice right now.

Bodhisattvas are ordinary people who practice the six perfections. They evolve, but they're still ordinary people. As a matter of fact, as they become more and more highly evolved, they become more and more genuinely

ordinary. But it takes a long period of practice to be genuinely ordinary. Buddhas are those who have wholeheartedly encountered and authenticated ordinariness. So the qualification of these buddhas is genuineness and authenticity, and these practices help us be authentic. All the different practices you can think of to help us be authentic are included in these six perfections. Even though there are infinite practices, they are all encompassed by these perfections.

Next Manjusri introduces a section of systematic categorizations by asking how many expressions of the teachings there are. The buddha answers: "Manjusri, the teachings of the Tathagata are threefold: Sutra, Vinaya, and Matrka." (277) *Matrka* here refers to Abhidharma. The Vinaya embraces the Buddha's teachings of the *pratimoksa* for disciples and bodhisattvas. It also consists of many stories of the disciples' successes and failures in the practice of the pratimoksa discipline. Etymologically *pratimoksa* means "that which is conducive to liberation." It includes the regulations and ceremonies for the disciples and the bodhisattvas and other things that are associated with this pratimoksa discipline. When Manjusri asks how many aspects there are to the bodhisattva's pratimoksa, the buddha says, "Manjusri, it consists of seven aspects: teachings concerning properly performed rites, teachings of things such as the bases of defeat, teachings of things such as the bases of infractions, teachings of the own-being of infractions, teachings of the own-being of non-infractions, teachings concerning emerging from infractions, and teachings concerning abandonment of vows." (283) Teachings about the bases of defeat are teachings about the actions that would lead to your being asked to leave the *sangha.* Infractions are violations of the discipline of ethics where there can be some reconciliation process and you can still stay in the group. This could be a table of contents for a book on the precepts.

Turning to the Abhidharma, the buddha says, "Manjusri, Matrkas are that which I have explained, differentiated, and taught in terms of eleven types of characters," and then he goes into these characters. (283) The word used here for Abhidharma, *matrka,* means "mothers," but matrka are actually formulas for the memorizing the theory that coordinates all the buddha's teachings.

This sutra is the buddha's teachings about the profound intimacy of buddha's wisdom. Memorizing these teachings, learning them by heart, is an essential ingredient in realizing this intimacy. To study this part of the

sutra, you have to memorize it and then talk to a teacher. When you memorize it, you start to understand it. This is not something you can just read and immediately understand. In fact, a lot of this material cannot be penetrated until the bodhisattvas memorize it.

Errant Tendencies

Next, the buddha talks about the difficulties immature beings have with this teaching. Because of predispositions and latent tendencies, they see people and things as having an own-being, and because of that they grasp a world as self and other. "Childish ordinary beings, relying on views that predispose them toward exaggerated adherence to the phenomena within the collection of errant tendencies and to an own-being of persons, grasp at 'I' and 'mine.' Due to this, they mistakenly conceive 'I see,' 'I hear,' 'I smell,' 'I experience,' 'I touch,' 'I know,' 'I eat,' 'I act,' 'I am afflicted,' and 'I am purified.'" (297) Childish beings cling to things and are passionate with regard to false views. Zen students may have the errant tendency to think in terms like "me" and "my sitting meditation," "my experience," "my practice," "my activity." Dogen Zenji said that to practice and confirm all things while carrying a self is delusion. To hold on to I while you eat, to hold on to I while you practice Zen, this is a definition of delusion. Here the sutra says the same thing. These errant tendencies are something to be gracious with, to be careful of, and to be patient with. When we notice the I and the mine and can relate to them in beneficial ways, we are practicing the first three bodhisattva precepts, the first three *paramitas.*

The ancestor Dogen also said that when we hear sounds or experience our sitting meditation with a fully engaged body and mind, it is not like the moon and its reflection in the water or an image and its reflection in a mirror. When one side is illuminated, the other side is dark. If we hear sounds while fully engaging body and mind, it isn't like "us" hearing "the sounds." It is not like the moon reflected in the water. It is either the moon or the reflection in the water. When you fully engage body and mind, hearing sounds, there is just sound and no you, or there is just you and no sounds. When you're fully engaged in sitting meditation, there is no you and your sitting; there is just sitting. Or there is no sitting; all there is is you. There are no sounds, no sitting; there is just you. But usually we're not fully engaged, so there appears to be you and your practice. However, if you are kind to this dualistic view of you and your practice, that kindness will help

you become more and more fully engaged, until, fully engaged, there is just the practice or just you. Such a practice is understanding reality just as it is, and this is the end of suffering, for the moment.

Next, buddha tells us that: "Those who understand reality just as it is, having fully abandoned the collection of errant tendencies, have no basis for any of the afflictions. They attain a body that is very pure, free from elaborations, uncompounded, free from manifest activity [i.e., the Dharmakaya]. Manjusri, know that this is the entire quintessential meaning." (299)

Then the buddha speaks these verses:

> Afflicted phenomena and pure phenomena
> are all without activity and personhood.
> Thus I explain that they are without activity,
> not purified or afflicted, in past or future.
> Relying on views that predispose one to the
> collection of errant tendencies,
> one grasps at "I" and "mine";
> one thinks "I see," "I eat," "I act,"
> "I am afflicted," and "I am purified."
> Knowing reality just as it is, abandoning the
> collection of errant tendencies,
> one attains a pure body with no basis for the afflictions,
> free from elaborations and uncompounded. (299)

The Tathagata's Mind

Manjusri asks, "Bhagavan, how should one know the characteristics of the Tathagata's mental factors?" How should we know the characteristics of the tathagata's thinking, or the arising of the tathagata's thinking? "Manjusri, Tathagatas are not distinguished by mind, thought, or consciousness. Indeed, you should know that a Tathagata's mind arises free from manifest activity; it is like an emanation." (299–301) Recall that mind, thought, and consciousness are the three transformations of mundane consciousness. *Mind* here refers to alaya vijnana, or the storehouse consciousness. The second transformation of consciousness, what is called thought here, is *manas* in Sanskrit, and it is also referred to as *klista manas,* thinking that is characterized by grasping a self. The third transformation of mind, which is called consciousness here, or vijnana, is the six active sense consciousnesses: the five material sense consciousnesses (*panca indriya*

vijnana) and the mind sense consciousness (*mano vijnana*). The buddha teaches that sentient beings just have these three transformations of consciousness, but buddhas do not. Buddhas have four kinds of wisdom, which are the highest evolution of these mundane minds.

The four types of wisdom are called the Great Round Mirror Wisdom (*adarsa-jnana*), the Wisdom of Equality (*samata jnana*), the Wondrous Subtle Discriminating Wisdom (*pratyaveksana jnana*), and the All-Accomplishing Wisdom (*krtyanusthana jnana*). These four wisdoms are the complete transformation of the storehouse consciousness (alaya vijnana), the defiling thinking consciousness (klista manas), the mental sense consciousness (mano vijnana), and the five material sense consciousnesses (panca indriya vijnana), respectively. The Great Round Mirror Wisdom is the joyous *samadhi* of the dharmakaya. The Wisdom of Equality is the compassionate nonduality of buddhas and sentient beings. The Subtle Discriminating Wisdom is buddha's teaching wisdom. And the All-Accomplishing Wisdom is buddha's practical wisdom that is attained through the workings of the five material sense consciousnesses.

Now the sutra teaches that we should know that the tathagata's mind still appears to arise, even though it is unencumbered by elaborations like arising and ceasing. But how does it appear to arise? It appears to arise through the intimate relationship between buddha's wisdom and the three transformations of sentient beings' minds. All the appearances of self and phenomena, like arising and ceasing, occur within these three transformations. These transformations are what fabricate self and phenomena. These three are the fabricated and the fabricators. By the bodhisattva vows and practice, they are transformed into four wisdoms, which realize the pure dharmakaya. This realized dharmakaya functions in a totally dynamic way. It is a radiance that responds to beings and creates innumerable transformation bodies, with minds that appear to arise.

The sutra also reveals another body, the *sambhogakaya,* the bliss body, or reward body. This body of buddha is in a sense also a transformation body, but it doesn't appear in form. It doesn't really appear or not appear. It is the blissful experience of the complete faith and understanding of the nondual intimacy of the transformations and their formless source.

The transformation body of buddha arises as a response to beings. It arises as an emanation. There is a buddha body that is free of elaboration, not characterized by thinking, consciousness, or mind, not characterized by

anything except purity and freedom from elaboration and manifest activity. But this pure body of nonelaboration radiates light; a great emanation of dharma comes from it. The working of this source is itself the light that is emanated, just as the total function of the sun completely includes its radiance. The sun doesn't work to make the light. Keenan's translation puts it like this: "A Tathagata is not to be described as having arisen from mind, thinking, and consciousness. Rather, all Tathagatas arise from a mental state of effortlessness. You should understand them to be magical creations."[2] These magical creations are effortlessly given in order to help sentient beings practice the bodhisattva way. There are just emanations, but they are emanations that teach us not to take the emanations as anything more than emanations.

These emanations are given so that beings may realize the dharma body from which they emanate. The unconstructedness in stillness emanates dharma for the sake of sentient beings' great peace and happiness. Tathagatas are not really involved in conceptual mental activity, but due to the power of wisdom from previous causal periods, mental phenomena arise without exertion as emanations. Tathagatas manifest whatever is suitable due to the power of concentration—samadhi—not the power of conceptual mental activity. The tathagatas are practicing this self-receiving and self-employing samadhi. They're enjoying being themselves free of elaboration and any kind of manifest activity. In this samadhi, thoughts arise in response to beings. This very pure dharmakaya can emanate, can exude, thoughts and speech. Although it is not constructed, it is not without speech and posture. Although no words reach it, light comes out of it. Its basic nature is like the sun—it is giving off light, but if you try to get at it, it turns into a black hole.

Manjusri seems a little puzzled when he asks his next question. "Bhagavan, if the Dharmakaya of the Tathagatas is free from all manifest activity, in that case, how could there be mental factors in the absence of manifest activity?" If the dharma body is beyond all deliberate effort, how could mental events occur? If the dharma body of all tathagatas is apart from all such effort, then how does it engender any thinking at all? The buddha responds, "Manjusri, this is due to the previous manifest activity of cultivating method and wisdom." This pure dharma body, unhindered by elaboration and manifest activity, is the fruit of an immeasurably long bodhisattva path of practicing all kinds of skillful methods and wisdom.

Due to such great past efforts, thinking now arises without effort. “Manjusri, for example, even though during mindless sleep there is no manifest activity for awakening, due to the force of former manifest activity, one will awaken. Even though, absorbed in cessation, there is no manifest activity for rising from absorption, due to the force of former mental activity, one will rise.” The cessation referred to here is a very profound level of concentration where you’re so absorbed that there is almost no sign of mental activity at all. But after going into such a state, one effortlessly comes out of it. “Just as the mind emerges from sleep and absorption in cessation, know that the Tathagatas’ mental factors come from the previous manifest activity of cultivating method and wisdom.” (301)

In Keenan’s translation this passage is rendered: “Because of the force of the effort whereby they have previously cultivated the wisdom of skillful methods, they do give rise to thinking.”[3] They do effortlessly give rise to thinking. In Cleary’s translation it is: “Arousal of mind occurs because of the power of concerted action of technique and insight previously cultivated.”[4] It happens by the force of previous effort, by previous cultivation of the way.

The practice is to continue making effort now—effort in meditation, effort in the perfections, effort in all our actions. The bathhouse attendant at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center once told a story of making an effort to wash away a little piece of lint in the shower, but for some reason it wouldn’t go down the drain. He tried and tried, and then he finally gave up and was cleaning the next shower when he looked over and saw the little piece of lint being washed away. There was a need for this shower to be washed. There was an effort made. Then this wonderful thing was given: The lint was washed away. He gave up trying to control things, and he was available to be amazed at how this happened without any effort. There is a history of effort, but when the actual washing, the actual healing happens, it is not because of human activity. But if humans don’t make an effort, they miss the wonder of the effortless.

Manjusri continues this conversation by asking: “Bhagavan, do Tathagatas have emanation minds or not?” In other words, does the nirmanakaya, does the transformation body, have mind or not? The buddha answers: “Manjusri, the minds do not exist, nor do the minds not exist; these minds lack autonomy and are empowered by [the Tathagatas’] minds.” (301) One of the translations from the Chinese puts it: “It neither

has a mind nor has no mind. Why? Because of having no mind relative to self, and because of having a mind relative to others."[5] And the other says: "It can be described neither as thinking nor as not thinking. This is so because it does not have any independent thinking, but it does have thinking dependent upon others."[6]

This reality body of the buddha is unfabricated, but it has emanations, boundless emanations. When buddhas manifest as appearances, they are called transformation bodies, nirmanakayas. The question now is do they have minds, and the answer is they neither have minds nor do they not have minds. The transformation of the true body of buddha into appearances is due to the buddha's power and blessings and a sentient being's request. Therefore the transformation bodies don't have their own mind, but they do have a mind that is dependent on others. Their mind arises from the interaction between sentient beings and buddha's dharma body. For this reason, it is not appropriate to say that these transformations, these emanations, have minds, and it is not appropriate to say they do not have minds. When the sutra says that they are not autonomous, it means that they do not arise by their own nature but by the blessed nature of the dharmakaya in response to the particular needs of living beings.

According to one great Mahayana treatise, the *Yogacarabhumi,* neither the nirmanakaya nor the sambhogakaya, the bliss body, manifest in a way that has a real mind and real mental factors, but they appear that way.[7] They don't have a mind or mental factors, as do sentient beings, because their appearances do not come from karma and do not come from their own conceptual thought. The minds creating them are external to them, so the emanations themselves cannot be said to really have minds.

The transformation bodies are blessed emanations of the unfabricated, unconstructed, unelaborated fruit of long practice. In other words, dharmakaya is born of bodhisattva vows and practices. The dharmakaya is born to respond; the fruit of those vows plus long practice gives rise to a consciousness that is not fabricated and is a great light. It glows, it radiates, it gives off these transformations. These transformations do not come from conceptual karmic consciousness; they arise from the intimate interaction between unconstructed consciousness with constructed karmic consciousness in stillness.

The next question Manjusri asks is, "Bhagavan, what are the characteristics of the manifest, complete enlightenment of Tathagatas, their

turning the wheel of doctrine, and their great parinirvana?" Now he is asking about the characteristics of the manifest tathagatas, not about the dharmakaya. What are the characteristics of the manifest complete enlightenment of the tathagatas? What is their turning of the wheel of dharma, and what is their *parinirvana*? The buddha replies, "Manjusri, they are of a non-dual character. They are neither manifestly, completely enlightened, nor not manifestly, completely enlightened. They neither turn the wheel of doctrine, nor do they not turn the wheel of doctrine. They neither have a great parinirvana, nor do they lack a great parinirvana. This is because the Dharmakaya is very pure and the Nirmanakaya are fully revealed." (303)

What are the characteristics of the buddhas' manifest, complete, perfect enlightenment? From the side of the dharmakaya, they're not completely and perfectly enlightened, because the dharmakaya is so pure, so free of elaborations like "completely," "perfectly," and "enlightened." But because the nirmanakaya is always manifesting, they are completely and perfectly enlightened. They do not turn the dharma wheel because the dharmakaya is pure. They do turn the dharma wheel because the nirmanakaya is constantly manifesting. They don't enter parinirvana because the dharmakaya is pure. They do enter great parinirvana because the transformation body is constantly appearing. So they're constantly being enlightened, turning the dharma wheel, and entering nirvana. And because the dharmakaya is so pure, they're not doing any of that. This is the nondual character of their enlightenment, their teaching, and their perfect nirvana.

This is a Mahayana sutra, and the buddha here is not a historical buddha. The buddha here is a transhistorical nirmanakaya buddha, and yet this teaching is in accord with the teachings of the historical buddha. I've heard, for example, that when the historical buddha, the nirmanakaya Buddha Shakyamuni, was about to die, he said: "Those who say that I enter perfect nirvana are not my disciples. Those who say that I do not enter complete nirvana, parinirvana, are not my disciples either." Thus, Shakyamuni Buddha says that there is a true body of buddha that does not enter into parinirvana, and there is a transformation body that does. So don't take either side. Be in the Middle Way between those two. That's where the buddha is living, together with her disciples. That's the nondual character of the buddha's enlightenment, the buddha's teaching, and the buddha's perfect peace and freedom.

If we practice with skillful means and wisdom, the dharmakaya that is the fruit of that practice will respond to the needs of sentient beings in such a way that they have something to see and listen to, something to remember and accept. They might see a being they identify as a compassionate bodhisattva and wish to be like that being. That wishing is a psychological response: I would like to be like that. In other words, they want to be like that being, and just like that being, they want to attain perfect buddhahood for the welfare of all beings. This is also a spiritual response, a thought of enlightenment, which is called *bodhicitta.* Then they may see or hear some appearance, a sutra or a dharma talk, that says, "Now that bodhicitta has arisen, please take care of this wonderful intention, because if you don't take care of it, you'll lose it." And how do you take care of it? By the practice of the six perfections.

The dharmakaya is the fruit of the complete practice of the six perfections, but the practices themselves do not focus on the fruit. The bodhisattvas aren't devoted to the results; they're devoted to the practices. They love the practices, not nirvana. The mind becomes transformed by doing the practices just for themselves. They are the responsive working of the dharmakaya. The dharmakaya of the buddha meets and responds to sentient beings, and thus a wish may arise, and the wish is fuel for these practices, and these practices take care of the wishing. Once born, the bodhicitta, the thought of enlightenment, is very easily lost. It needs to be taken care of after it's born, and the way you take care of it is through these practices. The beings and the books that show us how to practice are the nirmanakaya. They encourage us to do these practices, and these practices come to fruit as unconstructed great loving kindness and great compassion.

The Origins of the Transformation Body

Then Manjusri asks, "Bhagavan, how is it that Nirmanakaya are known to come forth from Tathagatas so that sentient beings generate merit through viewing, hearing, and revering them?" (303) Nirmanakaya comes forth so that sentient beings can generate merit and virtue. It's hard for us to generate merit and virtue without this coming forth. The question is, how is it that this transformation body comes forth so that beings can look at it, hear it, and venerate it, and thereby generate the practices? Another translation of this passage is: "World Honored One, all the varieties of sentient beings gain merit in seeing the Transformation bodies, in hearing

them and revering them. What kind of causality does the Tathagata exercise in their regard?"[8]

In response, the buddha says, "Manjusri, [a Nirmanakaya comes forth] due to intensely observing the Tathagatas, and also because Nirmanakaya are the blessings of the Tathagatas." (303) So the nirmanakaya comes forth because a sentient being is intensely contemplating the buddha, and the tathagata responds by giving blessings to those who are observing buddha, which is observing enlightenment in practice.

One might ask, doesn't the tathagata give blessings to everyone, even those who aren't observing the tathagata? The tathagata is totally devoted to all beings, but he can't bestow his blessings unless there is an intense and sincere request. The blessing is a sympathetic response. The buddha's teachings are not effective until beings really ask for them. But such beings might see someone else having a conversation with buddha, and think, "I want that," and then the blessing comes.

The tathagata emanates these transformations all the time, because sentient beings are constantly requesting such gifts. It is not that the tathagata is holding back. It is just that the tathagata doesn't appear in form for you unless you ask it to by practicing or by thinking, "I want to serve the tathagatas" or "I want to learn the tathagata's way." Thinking that way arises from a deep inner request for a good teacher. The tathagatas always wish to bestow blessings universally, but we don't realize this without a sincere request. If you are wholeheartedly practicing skillful means and wisdom, you will realize that the dharmakaya tathagata that is the final fruit of the bodhisattva path is responding to you and practicing together with you.

Practicing generosity is the basic way to open to and request buddha's teaching. It is the first step in the practice of enlightenment. Part of the practice of giving is learning to see everything as a gift, learning to see everything as the best the world can offer for us to practice with right now. Being able to see everything as a gift is an essential aspect in the extremely joyful bodhisattva practice of giving.

I propose that all sentient beings by their deepest true nature wish to meet and be intimate with enlightenment, to be intimate with their true, authentic nature. If they do not make a request for such a meeting, they are not asking for what they really want. Then they may feel distress and alienation, because they are not acting in accord with the deepest wish of their true

nature. It is our nature to be intimate with this pure dharmakaya and all its transformations that are offered for the benefit of all beings. Because true enlightenment is our nature, if we don't cultivate an active practice relationship with it, we are likely to be miserable sentient beings. In other words, our karmic consciousness, which is all we've got to work with, will not be properly oriented toward what will realize its deep true nature.

Tathagata can be translated as "thus come one." The light of the buddha tathagata only turns into appearances when somebody who lives in the realm of appearances calls out to it to thus come. If no one requests the pure light to be transformed into appearances, then there will be no nirmanakaya buddha. Buddhas are constantly emanating blessings, because beings are constantly calling for them. Even the buddhas can't overcome our karmic consciousness. However, if we devote our karmic consciousness to the six all-embracing bodhisattva practices, our karmic consciousness will be transformed into buddha's perfect wisdom and compassion. The buddha can't just reach into our hearts and minds and say, "Take this blessing." The buddha just keeps sending them, and gradually we start to open. And once we start opening to them, we have a responsibility, a practice responsibility, to them.

Sympathetic Response: The Pulley and the Well

This part of the sutra offers an Indian scriptural source for the teaching and practice of the communion between buddhas and sentient beings. This spiritual communion whereby transformation bodies appear so that sentient beings can see, listen to, and revere them, and thus develop great virtue, became very important for Chinese Mahayana and especially for the Zen school. The fifty-second koan in the *Book of Serenity* portrays this responsive relationship between sentient beings and the dharma body of buddha. The koan goes like this. "Attention! Caoshan asked elder De, 'The buddha's true dharma body is like vast space. It manifests in appearances in response to beings, like the moon in water. How can this principle of response be expressed?' De said, 'Like a pulley looking at a well.' Caoshan said, 'Well said, but that's only 80 percent of it.' De answered, 'How about you, teacher?' Caoshan said, 'Like the well looking at the pulley.'"[9]

The koan literally speaks of a relationship between a pulley and a well. But the word *pulley* is shorthand for pulley, rope, and bucket. It's a metaphor for the process of sentient beings requesting a meeting with the pure dharma body of the buddha. The pulley, rope, and bucket are a way for

us to request water from a well. This is elder De's wonderful image for sentient beings' request. Elder De could just as well have said, "It's like the well looking at the pulley." That would have been 80 percent, too. Either image alone is only 80 percent. It's not that the first one is 80 percent and the second one is only 20 percent. The first one is 80 percent, and the second one is 80 percent. In other words, both of them are really saying a lot. But you have to say the other side to get to 100 percent. In this story, 80 percent and 80 percent makes 100 percent. Two really excellent responses make 100 percent.

Think about this case, and look at how the pulley-rope-bucket and the well are looking at each other. The sutra says that the root condition is the power of the tathagata's blessing, so in this koan the main thing is the well with its water. Still, we need the pulley and bucket to request and receive the water. The well has its water, and we have our pulley and bucket. Getting the water is the point, but you've got to have a pulley to get the water. In this way, we are sympathetic to the dharmakaya, and the dharmakaya is sympathetic to us. By cultivating the bodhisattva practices like those of this great scripture, we become more and more intimate with the true body of buddha.

Carrying the metaphor of the koan even further, one could imagine that before the pulley and the bucket, someone dug a hole in the earth to make a well and reach the water. This is like our great buddha ancestors who realized and transmitted this dharma body to us. Now we have a well in our world, and the water coming forth is the sympathetic response to the effort of creating the well. We are indebted and grateful to our hardworking ancestors who dug the dharma well and reached the water for us to use today. Thus, we can set up the pulley and bucket of our bodhisattva practice to touch and bring forth the true dharma waters into our life. The dharmakaya responds to us depending on how we practice, just as the well responds to the pulley and bucket depending on how they are used.

In the commentary on this koan's intimate dynamic, Zen master Wansong Xingxiu offers this poetic reflection: "The falling flowers consciously accord with the flowing water. The flowing water mindlessly carries the fallen flowers."[10] The flowers consciously falling into the flowing water is a metaphor for the human request of our practice, and there is an unconstructed reception of these offerings by the water of the dharmakaya. The dharmakaya, which cannot be described in terms of mind,

consciousness, or intellect, is reflected in the image of the flowing water mindlessly carrying the fallen flowers. It is the transformed, embodied mind that is a fruit of complete bodhisattva practice. It is an awareness that is emptiness itself. It is a nonconceptual realization of suchness. It is mindless in the sense of sentient beings' minds. It is the buddha mind that can and does respond to all minds.

Zen master Wansong, commenting further on this story, asks, "As for the pulley looking at the well and the well looking at the pulley, does this allow understanding by dividing them? Does it admit of any transmission by learned understanding?"[11] Can we understand this story by separating the pulley looking at the well from the well looking at the pulley? Can we receive its transmission by learned study? Within wholehearted practice, analysis and learning can be part of authentic understanding and transmission, but outside this context, understanding and learning will miss the point. We are called by this sutra and by this koan to intimately penetrate both the dharmakaya and its manifestations and verify their nonduality in our practice. We must sit upright, practicing with this teaching by wholeheartedly plunging into it, like the bucket plunging into the water of the well. The sutra and the koan teach us that we must fully engage in the intimacy of spiritual communion. It is in being reverently upright in this communion that the transmission of the dharma body occurs.

Everything Is a Blessing

The four universal bodhisattva vows are:

Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them.
Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to cut through them.
Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them.
The buddha way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it.

The third vow teaches us that there is no boundary, that the doors to realizing liberating reality are limitless. Everything met with authentic bodhisattva practice becomes an occasion for seeing, hearing, and entering the true dharma. In this sense, everything that comes to us is the dharma. Everything, no matter how terrible, can, with sufficient training, be met with wisdom, compassion, and true enlightenment. Everything is a blessing. Sometimes we realize it, and sometimes we don't. But we are more likely to realize it if we remember that everything is a gift and vow to always practice giving.

The transformation body of buddha does not arise due to the power of the tathagata alone. It is also due to the request of beings. This sutra teaches that the wish of the thus-come-one to benefit beings is really the primary condition, but the tathagata's wish can't be fully effective unless somebody calls for help. The transformation body arises because sentient beings intensely observe and intensely contemplate the tathagata. Sitting meditation can be such a request, a request that buddha be manifested in the world. Then your sitting is saying, "May we have some enlightenment in this world?" or "May this sitting be a gesture toward manifesting compassion in this room, in this world, right now and in the endless future?"

The thought of what you want to be and what you don't want to be are mental fabrications. This is not meant as a disparagement of such fabrications. We need to work with fabrications of what we want to be in order to be free of all fabrication and enter buddha's unfabricated wisdom. If we have a fabrication like, "I would like to be someone who is totally committed to the welfare of others," we need to recognize and graciously accept that even our best intentions are still fabrications. If you have a fabricated intention like, "I would like to be a person who is totally devoted to my own welfare," that kind of fabrication will not set you free from fabrication. Most of us have this kind of selfish intention, but some of us will come to realize that it is not the source of true happiness.

There are four basic types of spiritual communion. In the first you are making a request and you don't know it, and you're responded to but you don't know it. The motivation is unconscious, and the response in indiscernible. That is really the most basic type of communion. The second kind is when you're making a request and you don't know it, and you get a response and you do know it. Here the request is unconscious, but the response is discernible. You don't know that you're saying, "Please, dharmakaya buddha, come into my life, be intimate with me." But suddenly you see the sun in a dewdrop, and you say, "Wow." The third type is that you make a request, and you're conscious of making it, and the answer comes, but you don't see it. Finally, the fourth type of spiritual communion occurs when you consciously make a request, and the response is discernible. Even after you're no longer ignorant of this wonderful communion, and you see the blessings coming all the time, all the other types of sympathetic response are still going on, too. They're all going on at

once, but when you completely realize the fourth type, you understand this. In other words, you would understand that if you ever met something and didn't see it as a blessing, that would just be because you were distracted from reality.

We're always requesting the blessing of the teachings, and the buddhas are always responding. It is our true nature to request the blessings of the buddha. We sentient beings are essentially a cry for enlightened wisdom and compassion, and enlightenment is realized within the awareness of this yearning. The buddhas are always radiating these blessings, and we're always requesting them. However, we're not usually conscious of the request or of the transmission of the blessing. That's the basic level of communion. For example, people sometimes go to a Zen monastery and they sit, and they may not consciously think that their sitting is requesting the blessings of the pure dharmakaya. But it is. Sitting, Shakyamuni Buddha's sitting, Bodhidharma's sitting, Dogen's sitting, are all a request to the pure dharmakaya to come into this world to benefit beings. The dharmakaya responds without delay. As *The Song of the Jewel Mirror Samadhi* says, inquiry (or request) and response come up together. So it's not that you're sitting now, and then later the blessing comes. The blessing is totally manifested by the sitting. The sitting is both our request and the buddha's response.

Unfabricated Being

The way all sentient beings are interrelated is unconstructed, unfabricated. Each of us may have some story about how we're related, but that is just a mental fabrication. We're actually related in a way that is completely inconceivable and unconstructed. If we think of the dharmakaya, that also is a mental fabrication. But the dharmakaya itself doesn't come, and it doesn't go. It doesn't arise or cease. It is pure of such elaborations. It is completely unconstructed and unfabricated. We're used to knowing things in terms of coming and going, but that way of knowing does not reach the dharmakaya. It is an absence of elaborations that is always present. But we hold on to elaborations such as coming and going, and the unelaborated is therefore inconceivable for us. So when we're holding on, we need to bring the bodhisattva practices into our construction of coming and going. Then, by fully engaging the constructions of coming and going, increasing and decreasing, they will be actualized and transformed. They will come to maturity as the dharmakaya.

In the meantime, the dharmakaya is sending us manifestations in response to our practice in the realm of knowing and not knowing. Our practices invoke gifts from the dharmakaya. Our teachers and inspiring fellow practitioners are transformation bodies. The triple treasure of buddha, dharma, and sangha is not an appearance, but it can be transformed into something that appears to us so that we can be inspired to engage in virtuous practice in the realm of appearance. But appearances will never reach the dharmakaya, because appearances are constructed.

When buddhas are truly buddhas, they do not necessarily think they are buddha. They are just doing the buddha work. They're helping people, they're teaching people, but they don't necessarily think that they're buddha. So it's not about getting to know that you're buddha, or getting to know that you understand. It's just understanding, with no self added on.

We begin by being devoted to beings. Then we learn to not elaborate our devotion into a subject or object of devotion. We're devoted to beings, but we're not elaborating in terms of self and other, or me and my job of helping. To be devoted to saving beings involves realizing, as the *Diamond Sutra* says, that there are no beings to save. To think that there are persons to save elaborates on the beings that we vow to save. Just being devoted to the welfare of all beings is the beginning and the end. Don't lean into their existence or nonexistence. Such uprightness is what saves beings. How does that save them? By demonstrating the way of being devoted to beings without elaboration. Then one realizes the body that is free of elaboration. This is the body that conveys the reality of nonelaboration, the reality of nonduality.

This devotion, this intimacy of beings with themselves and with each other, is not fabricated or constructed. I am fabricated, you are fabricated, but the intimacy of our relationship is not fabricated. Like the dharmakaya, this intimacy is pure and radiant, and it can be transformed into limitless forms. If you observe a sentient being, and you see how he is not independent of the buddha's blessing, and how he appears the way he does because of the beings who support him, then you see the nirmanakaya in that sentient being.

When a sentient being appears just as a sentient being, she is thus teaching other sentient beings the path of enlightenment. This is the teaching of the nirmanakaya. This dharma teaching is not her consciousness. It is the teaching of the dharma body thus coming into form

as her practice of immovably being herself. So it's possible for a sentient being with karmic consciousness to be transmitting dharma authentically before she fully realizes the dharma body of the buddha. As we say, the horse arrives before the donkey leaves. This transmission of the teachings embraces all three bodies of buddha. It is their way of practicing that conveys the light of dharma to all beings.

There are many stories of the way this mind of enlightenment (bodhicitta) arises. For example, once someone saw a monk urinating with a very dignified posture, and the mind of enlightenment arose. Something like that happened for me when I saw a picture in a 1954 *Life* magazine article on Buddhism. There was a photograph of the back of a layperson sitting in meditation on a tatami mat. I was struck by the quiet beauty of that sitting posture. The caption said, "In deepest thought," and I thought, yes, when a person is in deepest thought, their body should be beautiful. At that time, a little bit of bodhicitta arose in me. I wanted to have a posture that embodied and emanated deep thought like that person. When you see things and they turn you toward practice, they are nirmanakayas. In that way, you're in communion with the buddhas. That's how the thought of enlightenment is born. You don't make it happen by yourself. Buddhas don't make it happen to you. It is in the intimate communion of buddhas with sentient beings that the great mind and spirit of enlightenment arises.

The *Heart of Perfect Wisdom Scripture* says, In emptiness, there is no birth, no death, no coming, no going, no increase, no decrease. This is the emptiness of the reality body of buddha, and the heart of this body is great compassion. This reality body is actually the accomplishment of emptiness. Here you don't just dualistically understand emptiness. You become it. You are emptiness. Then your compassion is purified of all hindrance to responding appropriately to the needs of beings. The Perfect Wisdom sutras expound emptiness, which is the dharmakaya, and the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* makes it clear that this great emptiness is not nihilistic. This realization of emptiness is full of compassion, because it effortlessly responds to beings. I have not seen the Perfect Wisdom scriptures specifically express this. However, they do implicitly express this. For example, the *Heart Sutra* does say that the sutra is itself a mantra and that we should proclaim this mantra. We should proclaim this mantric teaching of emptiness in order to meet the true body of buddha, and thus relieve all suffering. We're not proclaiming nihilism; we're proclaiming wisdom and

pure compassion. Then the sutra says that the mantra is: *Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha.* The mantra is: "Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone entirely beyond. Welcome, enlightenment." Gone beyond what? Gone beyond all elaboration, gone beyond all manifest activity. Then we can welcome the dharma body of buddha and all beings. So let's proclaim this mantra. Let's make this mantra come true. Let's go beyond all elaboration, beyond all manifest activity, and enter the reality body of buddha.

The *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* follows and accords with the Perfect Wisdom scriptures and teaches us the mind and body that realize perfect wisdom. This sutra honors the heart of perfect wisdom and protects beings from misinterpreting the teachings as nihilism. The Perfect Wisdom scriptures have been called the second turning of the wheel, therefore this sutra may be called a third turning of the wheel.

As we reach the end of our work, I want to join the final chapter of this scripture with the conclusion of the *Book of Serenity,* as a gesture of joining the teachings of this scripture with the teachings of the Zen ancestors. The *Book of Serenity's* finale, the one hundredth case is:

> A monk asked the great Langya Jiao, "If the original state is clean and pure, then how suddenly do mountains and rivers and the great earth arise?" Langya said, "If the original state is clean and pure, then how suddenly do mountains and rivers and the great earth arise?"[12]

Here, in the end, the dharma body of the buddhas and mountains, rivers and great earth, join hands and walk joyfully together through birth and death for the welfare and liberation of all living beings.

NOTES

Foreword

1. See John Powers, "The Term Samdhinirmocana in the Title of the Samdhinirmocana Sutra," *Studies in Central and East Asian Religions: Journal of the Seminar for Buddhist Studies,* vol. 4 (1992), 52–62.
2. Etienne Lamotte, *Samdhinirmocana Sutra: L'Explication Des Mysteres* (Louvain & Paris: Universite de Louvain and Adrien Maisonneuve, 1935).
3. Ibid.
4. John Powers, trans., *Wisdom of Buddha: The Samdhinirmocana Mahayana Sutra,* (Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1995). All subsequent references to this source appear as page numbers in parentheses after quotations in text.
5. Thomas Cleary, trans., *Buddhist Yoga: A Comprehensive Course* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1995).
6. John P. Keenan, trans., *The Scripture on the Explication of Underlying Meaning* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2000).

Chapter 1

1. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958), 85.
2. See Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya,* vol. 2 (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1843–47.

Chapter 3

1. Thomas Cleary, trans., *Buddhist Yoga: A Comprehensive Course* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1995), 6.
2. Ibid.
3. John P. Keenan, trans., *The Scripture on the Explication of Underlying Meaning* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2000), 11–12.
4. Cleary, *Buddhist Yoga,* 12.

Chapter 4

1. Self-love has a kind of "me first" quality, and it should not be confused with loving yourself.

Chapter 7

1. Thomas Cleary, trans., *Buddhist Yoga: A Comprehensive Course,* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 43.
2. John P. Keenan, trans., *The Scripture on the Explication of Underlying Meaning,* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2000), 52.
3. Ibid.
4. *Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo,* vol. 48, no. 2004, 248B. Translated by author.
5. *Ways of Enlightenment* (Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1992), 148, quoted in John Powers, trans., *Wisdom of Buddha: The Samdhinirmocana Mahayana Sutra,* (Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1995), 341.

Chapter 8

1. *Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo,* vol. 82, no. 2585, 393A. Translated by author.

Chapter 9

1. *Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo,* vol. 48, no. 2005, 295. Translated by author.
2. John P. Keenan, trans., *The Scripture on the Explication of Underlying Meaning,* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2000), 109.
3. Ibid.
4. Thomas Cleary, *Buddhist Yoga: A Comprehensive Course* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 100–01.
5. Ibid., 101.
6. Keenan, *Underlying Meaning*, 109.
7. The sambhogakaya is not mentioned in this sutra because it is a later development of the Yogacara school.
8. Keenan, *Underlying Meaning*, 110.
9. *Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo,* vol. 48, no. 2004, 259C. Translated by author.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 259A.
12. Ibid., 291.

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