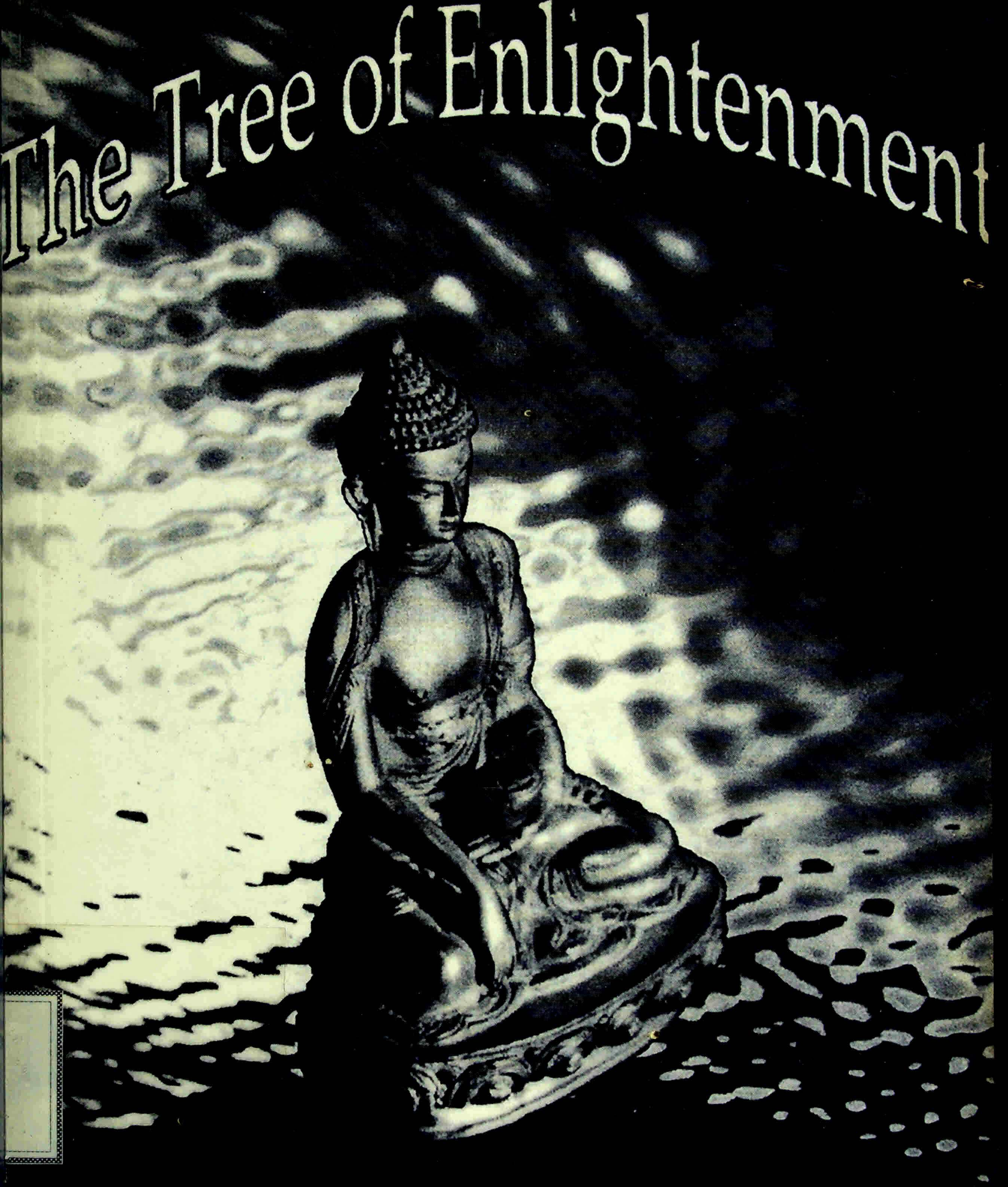
The Tree of Enlightenment



Peter Della Santina

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The Tree of Enlightenment

An Introduction to the Major Traditions of Buddhism

Chico Dharma Study Foundation
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Della Santina was born in the USA. He has spent many years studying and teaching in South and East Asia. He received his BA. in religion from Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, USA in 1972 and a MA in philosophy from the University of Delhi, India two years later. He did his Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies also from the University of Delhi, India in 1979.

He worked for three years for the Institute for Advanced Studies of world Religions, Fort Lee, New Jersey as a research scholar translating 8th century Buddhist philosophical texts from the Tibetan. He taught at several Universities and Buddhist centers in Europe and Asia including, the University of Pisa in Italy, the National University of Singapore and Tibet House in Delhi, India. He was the Coordinator of the Buddhist Studies project at the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, a department of the Ministry of Education from 1983 to 1985.

More recently, he was a senior fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla, India and taught Philosophy at the Fo Kuang Shan Academy of Chinese Buddhism , Kaoh-shiung, Taiwan.

For twenty-five years Peter Della Santina has been a student of H.H. Sakya Trizin, leader of the Sakya Order of Tibetan Buddhism and of eminent abets of the Sakya Tradition. He has practiced Buddhist meditation and has completed a number of retreats.

He has published several books and articles in academic journals including "Nagarjuna's Letter to King Gautamiputra", Delhi 1978 and 1982 and "Madhyamaka Schools In India", Delhi 1986 and the "Madhyamaka and Modern Western Philosophy", Philosophy East and West, Hawaii, 1986.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

From 1983 to 1985 when I was in Singapore engaged in the Buddhist studies project at the Curriculum Development Institute, I was invited by the Srilankaramaya Buddhist Temple and a number of Buddhist friends to deliver four series of lectures covering some of the major traditions of Buddhism. The lectures were popular, and thanks to the efforts of Mr. Yeo Eng Chen and others, they were recorded, transcribed and printed for limited free distribution to students of the Dharma. In the years since, the lectures which originally appeared in the form of four separate booklets have remained popular and have even been reprinted from time to time . Consequently, it seemed to me to be desirable to collect the four series of lectures in one volume, and after appropriate revision to publish them for the general use of the public.

In keeping with the original objectives of the lectures, this book is - as far as possible - non-technical. It is intended for ordinary readers not having any special expertise in Buddhist studies or in Buddhist canonical languages. Original language terms have therefore been kept to a minimum and foot notes have been avoided. Names of texts cited are sometimes left untranslated, but this is because the English renderings of some titles are awkward and hardly make their subject matter more clear. In brief I hope that this book will serve as the beginning of its readers' Buddhist education and not the end of it. The book can supply a general introduction to the major traditions of Buddhism, but it does not pretend to be complete or definitive. Neither can I honestly affirm that it is altogether free from errors, and therefore I apologize in advance for any that may remain in spite of my best efforts.

A number of original language terms and personal names which have by now entered the English language such as "Dharma", "karma", "Nirvana" and "Shakyamuni" have been used throughout the book in their Sanskrit forms. As for the rest, Pali original language terms, text titles and personal names have been retained in parts I and IV which are largely based on Fali sources, while Sanskrit original language technical terms, text titles and personal names have been used in parts II and III which are largely based on Sanskrit and Tibetan sources. Occasionally, this general rule has been ignored when the names of texts and persons referred to in a given context actually occur in another one of the canonical languages. In as much as Pali and Sanskrit are in most cases quite similar, I trust the average reader will have no difficulty in coping with this arrangement.

I owe a great debt to a very large number of people for the realization of this book. First and foremost, I would like to thank H.H. Sakya Trizin without whom my interest in Buddhism might well have remained superficial and merely intellectual.

Next I would like to thank Yeo Eng Chen and many other members of the Singapore Buddhist community without whose help and encouragement the lectures would never have been delivered and the original transcripts on which this book is based, never made. Then, I would also like to thank a great many friends and students in Asia, Europe and America who encouraged me to think the lectures might be useful for an even wider readership. Finally, I want to thank all those who have been involved in the actual preparation of the present book. They include, the members of the Chico Dharma study group, specially, Jo and Jim Murphy, Victoria Scott for her help with the manuscript, L. Jamspal for his help with the original language terms, my wife Krishna Ghosh for the many hours she spent checking the manuscript, and my son Siddhartha Della Santina for the cover design and formatting of the manuscript.

In conclusion, I would like to add that by offering this book to the public, the Chico Dharma Study Foundation hopes to initiate a program whereby Buddhist Studies materials may be made available free of commercial considerations to students of Buddhism through a variety of media. For the time being, the present book will be available not only in hard copy, but also over the internet. In the future, the Chico Dharma study Foundation plans to produce and make available important materials in the fields of Buddhist philosophy, practice and folk lore, including materials for children and young adults. We welcome the help of anyone who would like to contribute in any way to the educational activities of the foundation and we invite you to contact us with your suggestions.

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Part One

The Fundamentals of Buddhism

Chapter One
Buddhism: A Modern Perspective

In Part One of this book, it is my intention to cover what I would like to call the fundamentals of Buddhism, that is, the basic teaching of Buddhism. This survey will include the Life of the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, karma, rebirth, interdependent origination, the three universal characteristics, and the teaching of the five aggregates. Before the actual treatment of these basic topics, I would like to deal first with the notion of Buddhism in perspective, and that a modern perspective. There are many ways in which people of different times and different cultures have approached Buddhism, but I believe it may be especially useful to contrast the modern attitude toward Buddhism with the traditional attitude toward it. This kind of comparative consideration may prove useful because understanding how people of different times and cultures view a particular phenomenon can begin to show us the limitations of our own particular perspective.

Buddhism has awakened considerable interest in the West, and there are many persons who enjoy positions of some note in western society who are either Buddhist or sympathetic to Buddhism. This is perhaps most clearly exemplified by the remark said to have been made by the great twentieth-century scientist Albert Einstein, that although he was not a religious man, if he had been one, he would have been a Buddhist. At first glance it may seem surprising that such a remark should be made by one regarded as the father of modern western science.

However, if we look more closely at contemporary western society, we find a Buddhist astrophysicist in France, a psychologist who is a Buddhist in Italy, and a leading English judge who is one, too. Indeed, it would not be too much to say that Buddhism is fast becoming the favorite choice of westerners who belong to the elite in the areas of science and art. I will look at the reasons for this in a moment, but before doing so, I would like to compare this situation with that found in traditionally Buddhist communities and countries. Take, for example, the situation among the traditionally Buddhist communities of Southeast and East Asia.

In Europe and America, Buddhism is generally believed to be more than usually advanced in its thought, rigorously rational, and sophisticated. I will not attempt to conceal the fact that it came as quite a shock to me when I first went to Southeast Asia and found that many people there view Buddhism as old-fashioned, irrational, and bound up with outdated superstitions. This is one of two prevalent attitudes that obstruct the appreciation of Buddhism in such traditionally Buddhist communities. The other popular misconception that afflicts Buddhism in such communities is the notion that it is so deep and so abstract that no one can ever possibly understand it. Perhaps it is the intellectual arrogance of the West that has saved Europeans and Americans from this aberration. In short, when I look at the common attitudes prevailing in the West and in the East toward Buddhism, I find a radical contrast. This is why I want to begin our examination of Buddhism with a consideration of alternative perspectives.

In the West, Buddhism has a certain image in the popular mind, while in traditionally Buddhist communities, Buddhism has an altogether different image. The dismissive attitude that prevails in such communities has to be overcome before people there can really begin to appreciate the teaching of the Buddha. In this way people everywhere can acquire the balanced perspective needed to

approach Buddhism without prejudice and preconceived ideas. Consequently, this introduction to Buddhism is intended not only for people in the West but also for people in traditionally Buddhist communities who may have become estranged from the religion for a variety of social and cultural reasons. It should also be said, of course, that the image of Buddhism common in the West may be limited in its own way, but I hope that, in the chapters that follow, a clear and objective presentation of the traditions of Buddhism will, finally, emerge.

For the moment, to turn again to the western attitude toward Buddhism, one of the first features we can appreciate about it is the fact that it is not culture-bound, that is to say, it is not restricted to any particular society, race, or ethnic group. There are some religions that are culture-bound: Judaism is one example; Hinduism is another. However, Buddhism is not similarly constrained. That is why, historically, we have had the development of Indian Buddhism, Sri Lankan Buddhism, Thai Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and so on. In the near future, I have no doubt that we will see the emergence of English Buddhism, French Buddhism, Italian Buddhism, American Buddhism, and the like. All this is possible because Buddhism is not culture-bound. It moves very easily from one cultural context to another because its emphasis is on internal practice rather than external forms of religious behavior. Its emphasis is on the way each practitioner develops his or her own mind, not on how he dresses, the kind of food he eats, the way he wears his hair, and so forth.

The second point to which I would like to draw your attention is the pragmatism of Buddhism, that is to say, its practical orientation. Buddhism addresses a practical problem. It is not interested in academic questions and metaphysical theories. The Buddhist approach is to identify a real problem and

deal with it in a practical way. Again, this attitude is very much in keeping with western conceptions of utilitarianism and scientific problem-solving. Very briefly, we might say the Buddhist approach is encapsulated in the maxim, "If it works, use it." This attitude is an integral part of modern western political, economic, and scientific practice.

The pragmatic approach of Buddhism is expressed very clearly in the *Chulamalunkya Sutta,* a discourse in which the Buddha himself made use of the parable of a wounded man. In the story, a man wounded by an arrow wishes to know who shot the arrow, the direction from which it came, whether the arrowhead is bone or iron, and whether the shaft is one kind of wood or another before he will let the arrow be removed. His attitude is likened to that of people who want to know about the origin of the universe—whether it is eternal or not, finite in space or not, and so on—before they will undertake to practice a religion. Such people will die before they ever have the answers to all their irrelevant questions, just as the man in the parable will die before he has all the answers he seeks about the origin and nature of the arrow.

This story illustrates the practical orientation of the Buddha and Buddhism. It has a great deal to tell us about the whole question of priorities and scientific problem-solving. We will not make much progress in the development of wisdom if we ask the wrong questions. It is essentially a matter of priorities. The first priority for all of us is the reduction and eventual elimination of suffering. The Buddha recognized this and consequently pointed out the futility of speculating about the origin and nature of the universe—precisely because, like the man in the parable, we have all been struck down by an arrow, the arrow of suffering.

Thus we must ask questions that are directly related to the removal of the arrow of suffering and not waste our precious time on irrelevant inquiries. This

idea can be expressed in a very simple way. We can all see that, in our daily lives, we constantly make choices based on priorities. For instance, suppose you are cooking and decide that, while the pot of beans is boiling, you will dust the furniture or sweep the floor. But as you are occupied with this task, you suddenly smell something burning: you then have to choose whether to carry on with your dusting or sweeping or go immediately to the stove to turn down the flame and thereby save your dinner. In the same way, if we want to make progress toward wisdom, we must clearly recognize our priorities. This point is made very nicely in the parable of the wounded man.

The third point I would like to discuss is the teaching on the importance of verifying the truth by means of recourse to personal experience. This point is made very clearly by the Buddha in his advice to the Kalamas contained in the *Kesaputtiya Sutta*.. The Kalamas were a community of town-dwellers in some ways very much like people in the contemporary world, who are exposed to so many different and often conflicting versions of the truth. They went to the Buddha and asked him how they were to judge the truth of the conflicting claims made by various religious teachers. The Buddha told them not to accept anything merely on the basis of purported authority, nor to accept anything simply because it is contained in sacred text, nor to accept anything on the basis of common opinion, nor because it seems reasonable, nor yet again because of reverence for a teacher. He even went so far as to advise them not to accept his own teaching without verification of its truth through personal experience.

The Buddha asked the Kalamas to test whatever they might hear in the light of their own experience. Only when they came to know for themselves that such and such things were harmful should they seek to abandon them. Alternatively, when they came to know for themselves that certain things were beneficial—that they

were conducive to peace and tranquillity—then they should seek to cultivate them. We, too, must judge the truth of whatever we are taught in the light of our own personal experience.

In his advice to the Kalamas, I think we can see clearly the Buddha's doctrine of self-reliance in the acquisition of knowledge. We ought to use our own minds as a kind of private test tube. We can all see for ourselves that when greed and anger are present in our minds, they lead to disquiet and suffering. By the same token, we can all see for ourselves that when greed and anger are absent from our minds, it results in tranquillity and happiness. This is a very simple personal experiment that we can all do. The verification of the validity of teachings in the light of one's own personal experience is very important, because what the Buddha taught will only be effective, will only really succeed in changing our lives, if we can carry out this kind of personal experiment and make the teaching our very own. Only when we can verify the truth of the Buddha's teachings by recourse to our own experience can we be sure that we are making progress on the path to the elimination of suffering.

Again we can see a striking similarity between the approach of the Buddha and the scientific approach to the quest for knowledge. The Buddha stressed the importance of objective observation, which is in a sense the key to the Buddhist method for acquiring knowledge. It is objective observation that yields the first of the Four Noble Truths, the truth of suffering; it is observation that verifies one's progress along the steps of the path; and it is observation that confirms the realization of the complete cessation of suffering. Therefore, at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the Buddhist path to liberation, the role of observation is essential.

This is not very different from the role played by objective observation in the

scientific tradition of the West. The scientific tradition teaches that when we observe a problem, we must first formulate a general theory and then a specific hypothesis. The same procedure obtains in the case of the Four Noble Truths. Here the general theory is that all things must have a cause, while the specific hypothesis is that the cause of suffering is craving and ignorance (the second noble truth). This hypothesis can be verified by the experimental method embodied in the steps of the Eightfold Path. By means of the steps of this path, the soundness of the second noble truth can be established. In addition, the reality of the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering, can be verified, because through cultivating the path craving and ignorance are eliminated and the supreme happiness of nirvana is attained. This experimental process is repeatable, in keeping with sound scientific practice: not only did the Buddha attain the end of suffering but so, too, we can see historically, did all those who followed his path to the end.

Therefore, when we look closely at the teaching of the Buddha, we find that his approach has a great deal in common with the approach of science. This has naturally aroused a tremendous amount of interest in Buddhism among modern-minded people. We can begin to see why Einstein was able to make a remark like the one credited to him. The general agreement between the Buddhist approach and that of modern science will become even clearer when we examine the Buddhist attitude toward the facts of experience, which, like that of science, is analytical.

According to the teaching of the Buddha, the data of experience are divided into two components, the objective component and the subjective component; in other words, the things we perceive around us, and we ourselves, the subjective perceivers. Buddhism has long been noted for its analytical approach in the fields of philosophy and psychology. What is meant by this is that the Buddha analyzed

the facts of experience into various components or factors. The most basic of these components are the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness. These five aggregates can be viewed in terms of the eighteen elements, and there is also an even more elaborate analysis in terms of the seventy-two factors.

The procedure adopted here is analytical inasmuch as it breaks up the data of experience into their various components. The Buddha was not satisfied with a vague conception of experience in general; rather, he analyzed experience, probed its essence, and broke it down into its components, just as we might break down the phenomenon of a chariot into the wheels, the axle, the body, and so forth. The object of this exercise is to gain a better idea of how these phenomena function. When, for instance, we see a flower, hear a piece of music, or meet with a friend, all these experiences arise as the direct result of a combination of component elements.

This has been called the analytical approach of Buddhism, and again, it is not at all strange to modern science and philosophy. We find the analytical approach very widely applied in science, while in philosophy the analytical approach has characterized the thought of many European philosophers, perhaps most clearly and recently that of Bertrand Russell. Studies have been done comparing his analytical philosophy quite successfully with that of early Buddhism. Consequently, in western science and philosophy, we find a very close parallel to the analytical method as it is taught within the Buddhist tradition. This is one of the familiar and recognizable features that has attracted modern western intellectuals and academics to Buddhist philosophy. Modern psychologists, too, are now deeply interested in the Buddhist analysis of the various factors of consciousness: feeling, perception, and volition. They are turning in increasing numbers to the ancient teaching of the Buddha to gain greater insight into their

own discipline.

This growing interest in the teaching of the Buddha—provoked by these many areas of affinity between Buddhist thought and the major currents of modern science, philosophy, and psychology—has reached its apex in the twentieth century with the startling suggestions advanced by relativity theory and quantum physics, which represent the very latest developments in experimental and theoretical science. Here, again, it is evident not only that the Buddha anticipated the primary methods of science (namely, observation, experimentation, and analysis), but also that, in some of their most specific conclusions about the nature of man and the universe, Buddhism and science actually coincide.

For example, the importance of consciousness in the formation of experience, so long ignored in the West, has now been recognized. Not long ago, a noted physicist remarked that the universe may really be just something like a great thought. This very clearly follows in the footsteps of the teaching of the Buddha expressed in the *Dhammapada,* where it is said that the mind is the maker of all things. Likewise, the relativity of matter and energy—the recognition that there is no radical division between mind and matter—has now been confirmed by the most recent developments in modern experimental science.

The consequence of all this is that, in the context of contemporary western culture, scientists, psychologists, and philosophers have found in Buddhism a tradition in harmony with some of the most basic principles of western thought. In addition, they find Buddhism particularly interesting because, although the principal methods and conclusions of the western scientific tradition often closely resemble those of Buddhism, western science has thus far suggested no practical way of achieving an inner transformation, whereas in Buddhism such a way is clearly indicated. While science has taught us to build better cities, expressways,

factories, and farms, it has not taught us to build better people. Therefore people in the contemporary world are turning to Buddhism, an ancient philosophy that has many features in common with the western scientific tradition but that goes beyond the materialism of the West, beyond the limits of practical science as we have known it thus far.

Chapter Two
The Pre-Buddhist Background

Although studies of Buddhism usually begin with the life of the Buddha, the historical founder of the faith, I would like first to examine the situation that prevailed in India before the time of the Buddha, that is to say, the pre-Buddhist background of Buddhism. I personally believe such an examination to be particularly helpful because it enables us to understand the life and teaching of the Buddha in a broader historical and cultural context. This sort of retrospective examination can help us better understand the nature of Buddhism in particular, and perhaps, too, the nature of Indian philosophy and religion in general.

I would like to begin our examination of the origin and development of Indian philosophy and religion with a geographical analogy. In the north of the Indian subcontinent are two great rivers, the Ganges and the Yamuna. These two great rivers have separate sources in the high Himalayas, and their courses remain quite separate for the better part of their great length. Gradually they draw nearer to each other and eventually unite in the plains of northern India, near the city now known as Allahabad. From their point of confluence they flow on together until they empty into the Bay of Bengal.

The geography of these two great rivers exemplifies the origin and development of Indian philosophy and religion because in Indian culture, as in Indian geography, there are two great currents of thought that were originally quite different and distinct in character. For many centuries the course of these two remained separate

and distinct, but eventually they drew closer together, merged, and continued to flow on together, almost indistinguishable from each other, right up to the present day. Perhaps as we proceed with our examination of the pre-Buddhist culture of India, we can bear in mind the image of these rivers whose origins were separate, but which at a certain point merged and continued together to the sea.

When we look into the very early history of India, we find that, in the third millennium B.C.E., there was a very highly developed civilization on the subcontinent. This civilization was easily as old as those which are called the cradles of human culture, such as the civilizations of Egypt and Babylon. It flourished from about 2800 to 1800 B.C.E. and was known as the Indus Valley, or the Harappan, civilization. It extended from what is now western Pakistan south to a point near present-day Bombay and east to a point near Shimla, in the foothills of the Himalayas.

If you look at a map of Asia, you will at once realize that the geographical extent of the Indus Valley civilization was immense. And not only was this civilization stable for a thousand years, it was also very advanced, both materially and spiritually. Materially, the Indus Valley civilization was agrarian and exhibited a great degree of skill in irrigation and urban planning. There is evidence that the people of this civilization had evolved a system of mathematics based on a binary model—the same model employed in modern computing. The Indus Valley civilization was literate and developed a script that remains largely undeciphered to date. (The meaning of the Indus Valley script is one of the great unsolved mysteries of linguistic archaeology.) In addition, there is ample evidence that the civilization enjoyed a very highly developed spiritual culture. Archaeological discoveries at two major sites, Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, bear witness to this.

The peaceful unfolding of the life of this great ancient civilization was rather

abruptly interrupted sometime between 1800 and 1500 B.C.E., either by some natural disaster or by an invasion. What is certain is that, simultaneous with or very soon after the demise of the Indus Valley civilization, the subcontinent was invaded from the northwest—just as, centuries later, Muslim invaders were to come from that direction. The invading people were known as Aryans. This term designated a people who originally belonged to a region somewhere in Eastern Europe, perhaps the steppes of modern Poland and the Ukraine. The Aryans were very different from the people of the Indus Valley civilization. Whereas the latter had been agrarian and sedentary, the Aryans were nomadic and pastoral. They were unused to urban life. A warlike and expansionist people, they lived in large part on the spoils of conquest won from the peoples they subjugated in the course of their migrations. When the Aryans arrived in India, they very soon became the dominant civilization, and after the middle of the second millennium B.C.E., Indian society was largely dominated by Aryan values.

Let us now look at the religious attitudes of the people of the Indus Valley civilization and of the Aryan civilization. This is of particular interest to us. As I have said, the Indus Valley civilization had a written language which we have thus far been unable to decipher. Nonetheless, our knowledge of the civilization is derived from two reliable sources: the archaeological discoveries at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, and the written records of the Aryans, who described the religious behavior and beliefs of the people they came to dominate.

Archaeological excavations have revealed a number of symbols important to the people of the Indus Valley civilization. These symbols have religious significance and are also sacred to Buddhism. They include the pipal tree (later known as the *bodhi* tree, or *ficus religiosa*), and animals such as the elephant and deer. Perhaps most significant, the image of a human figure has been found that is seated in a cross-

legged posture, hands resting on the knees and eyes narrowed—clearly suggestive of the attitude of meditation. With the help of these archaeological discoveries and other evidence, eminent scholars have concluded that the origins of the practices of yoga and meditation can be traced to the Indus Valley civilization. Moreover, when we study the descriptions of the religious practices of the people of the Indus Valley civilization found in the written records of the early Aryans, the *Vedas*, we find the figure of the wandering ascetic frequently mentioned. These ascetics are said to have practiced methods of mind training, to have been celibate, naked or clothed in the most meager of garments, to have had no fixed abode, and to have taught the way beyond birth and death.

Putting together the evidence gathered from the archaeological findings at the major sites of the Indus Valley civilization and that found in the early records of the Aryans, the picture that emerges of the religious attitudes and practices of the people of the Indus Valley civilization, while sketchy, is clear enough in its essentials. The religion of the Indus Valley civilization evidently contained several important elements. First of all, meditation, or the practice of training the mind, was clearly present. Second, the practice of renunciation—that is to say, abandoning household life and living the life of a homeless ascetic, or mendicant—was also common. Third, it is clear that there was some conception of rebirth or reincarnation occurring over the course of a countless number of lives, and, fourth, a sense of moral responsibility extending beyond this life—that is to say, some form of the conception of karma. Last, there was a paramount goal of religious life—namely, the goal of liberation, of freedom from the endless cycle of birth and death. These were the outstanding features of the religion of the earliest civilization of India.

Next, let us look at the religion of the early Aryan people, which contrasted sharply with that of the Indus Valley civilization. Indeed, it would be difficult to find

two religious cultures more radically different. Constructing a complete picture of the religious attitudes and practices of the early Aryans is much simpler than doing so for the Indus Valley people. When the Aryans arrived in India, they brought with them a religion that was completely secular in nature. As I have said, they were an expansionist society—a pioneer society, if you like. Their origins lay in Eastern Europe, and their religion in many ways resembled that of the ancient Greeks. If you look at descriptions of the gods who composed the Greek pantheon, you will not fail to notice striking parallels between the two. The Aryans revered a number of gods who were personifications of natural phenomena, including Indra (not unlike Zeus), the god of thunder and lightning; Agni, the god of fire, and Varuna, the god of water—to name just a few.

Whereas in the religion of the Indus Valley civilization the ascetic was the preeminent religious figure, in the Aryan religious establishment the priest was by far the most important. Whereas in the religious value system of the Indus Valley civilization renunciation was paramount, in the value system of the early Aryans the most worthy state was that of the family man, or householder. Whereas in the religious culture of the Indus Valley civilization the value of progeny was not emphasized, for the early Aryans progeny, particularly sons, was the highest priority. The religion of the Indus Valley civilization emphasized the practice of meditation, while the Aryan faith relied on the practice of sacrifice, which was its primary means of communicating with the gods, securing victory in war, obtaining sons and wealth, and finally reaching heaven. While the religion of the Indus Valley civilization included the conceptions of rebirth and karma, the early Aryans had no such conceptions. The notion of moral responsibility extending beyond the present life appears to have been unknown to the Aryans, for whom the highest social value was loyalty to the group, a virtue calculated to contribute to the power and cohesion

of the tribe. Finally, the ultimate goal of religious life for the people of the Indus Valley civilization was liberation, a state that transcended birth and death, whereas for the early Aryans the goal was simply heaven—and a heaven that looked very much like a perfected version of this world, in fact.

In brief, while the religion of the Indus Valley civilization stressed renunciation, meditation, rebirth, karma, and the final goal of liberation, the Aryan religion stressed this life, ritual sacrifice, loyalty, wealth, progeny, power, and heaven. Thus it is clear that the sets of religious attitudes, practices, and values professed by these two ancient civilizations of India were almost diametrically opposed to each other. And yet, over the course of centuries of cohabitation, these two religious traditions did manage to merge and become, in many instances, practically indistinguishable.

Before concluding our review of the salient features of the Indus Valley and early Aryan religions, it should be mentioned that the religious culture of the Aryans was characterized by two further elements unknown and foreign to the religion of the Indus Valley people. The two elements I have in mind are caste—that is to say, the division of society into social strata—and belief in the authority and infallibility of revelation, in this case the ancient scriptures known as the *Vedas*. The religious culture of the Indus Valley civilization did not accept these conceptions, and they remained constant points of contention dividing the two major religious traditions of India.

The history of Indian religion from 1500 B.C.E. to the sixth century B.C.E. (i.e., the time of the Buddha) is the history of the interaction between these two originally opposed traditions. As the Aryan people gradually moved eastward and southward, settling and spreading their influence over most of the Indian subcontinent, they adopted a more sedentary pattern of life. Little by little, the opposing religious cultures of the two peoples began to interact, influence, and even merge with each

other. This is precisely the phenomenon I had in mind earlier when I referred to the merging of the two great rivers of India, the Ganges and the Yamuna.

By the time of the Buddha, a very heterogeneous religious culture flourished in India. This is clear even from a superficial look at some of the prominent facts about the Buddha's life. For example, after his birth, two distinct types of people made predictions about his future greatness. The first prophesy was pronounced by Asita, who was a hermit and ascetic living in the mountains, although the biographies of the Buddha insist that Asita was a Brahmin, a member of the priestly caste of Aryan society. This in itself is clear evidence of the interaction of the two ancient religious traditions, for it indicates that, by the sixth century B.C.E., even Brahmins had begun to abandon household life and adopt the life of homeless ascetics, something unheard of a thousand years before. A little later, we are told that 108 Brahmins were invited to the ceremony for bestowing a name on the young Buddha. There, they also prophesied the future greatness of the child. These men were evidently priests who had not renounced household life and who thus represented the original, orthodox practice accepted in the Aryan fold.

How is it that two traditions initially so different were able to merge? I think the answer may be found in the dramatic changes that occurred in the life of the Indian people between the middle of the second millennium B.C.E. and the time of the Buddha. Aryan expansion came to an end when the Aryans had spread across the plains of India. The end of this expansion brought about many social, economic, and political changes. First of all, the tribal, nomadic, and pastoral way of life of the early Aryans gradually changed into a more sedentary, agrarian, and eventually urban pattern of existence. Before long, the majority of the population was living in urban settlements where the people were somewhat removed from the natural forces which had been personified in the gods of the early Aryans.

Second, commerce became increasingly important. Whereas priests and warriors had been the dominant figures in early Aryan society—priests because they communicated with the gods, and warriors because they waged war against the enemies of the tribe and brought home the spoils of battle—now merchants became ascendant. In the time of the Buddha, this trend is evident in the famous disciples who belonged to the merchant class—Anathapindika, to name just one example.

Last, the organization of society along tribal lines gradually became obsolete, and the territorial state began to evolve. No longer was society organized into tribes within which there were very close sets of personal loyalties. The tribal pattern of social organization was replaced by the territorial state, in which many people of different tribes existed together. The kingdom of Magadha, ruled by King Bimbisara, the famous patron and disciple of the Buddha, is an example of such an emerging territorial state.

These social, economic, and political changes contributed to a growing willingness on the part of the Aryan people to accept and adopt the religious ideas of the Indus Valley civilization. Although the Aryans had materially dominated the earlier, indigenous civilization of the subcontinent, the next thousand to two thousand years saw them come increasingly under the influence of religious attitudes, practices, and values adopted from the religion of the Indus Valley civilization. Consequently, by the beginning of the common era, the distinction between the Aryan tradition and that of the Indus Valley civilization was more and more difficult to draw. In fact, this historical reality is responsible for the misconception expressed in the claim that Buddhism was a protest against, or an offshoot of, Hinduism.

Buddhism is a religion that draws most of its inspiration from the religious culture of the Indus Valley civilization. The elements of renunciation, meditation,

rebirth, karma, and liberation, which were important components of the religious culture of the Indus Valley people, are also important in Buddhism. The Buddha himself very probably meant to indicate that the origins of the religion he proclaimed lay in the Indus Valley civilization when he said that the path he taught was an ancient path, and that the goal to which he pointed was an ancient goal. Buddhism also maintains a tradition of six prehistoric Buddhas who are believed to have flourished before the Buddha Shakyamuni. All this, I believe, points to a certain continuity between the religious culture and traditions of the Indus Valley civilization and the teaching of the Buddha.

When we examine the two religious phenomena we call Buddhism and Hinduism, we find a greater or smaller proportion or preponderance of elements inherited from each of the two great religious traditions of ancient India. In Buddhism the greater proportion of significant elements is clearly inherited from the religion of the Indus Valley civilization, while a far smaller proportion may be traced to the religion of the early Aryans. There are undoubtedly elements in Buddhism inherited from the religion of the Aryans, such as the presence of the gods of the *Vedas,* but their role is peripheral.

Conversely, many schools of Hinduism retain a greater proportion of elements of religious culture inherited from the Aryan tradition and a much smaller proportion that can be traced back to the religion of the Indus Valley. Many schools of Hinduism still emphasize caste, the authority of revelation in the shape of the *Vedas,* and the efficacy of the practice of sacrifice. Notwithstanding these clearly Aryan elements, a place is also made in Hinduism for important elements of the culture of the Indus Valley civilization, such as renunciation, meditation, rebirth, karma, and liberation.

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CHAPTER THREE
The Life of the Buddha

Next I would like to turn to the life of the Buddha Shakyamuni. I shall not attempt to treat this topic exhaustively, nor to cover the great majority of the biography of Shakyamuni. The accounts of the life of the Buddha are for the most part narrative, and they have been presented elsewhere by both ancient and modern authors. Instead, I would like to use this brief consideration of the life of the Buddha to draw attention to a few important Buddhist values that are strikingly illustrated in the accounts of the life of Shakyamuni.

In Chapter 2, I discussed the origins and nature of the two ancient traditions of India, the one having its source in the religious culture of the Indus Valley civilization and the other associated with the Aryan civilization. In addition, I indicated that these two ancient traditions, originally quite different, in the course of time began to interact with and influence each other until, by the first millennium of the common era, they became almost indistinguishable one from the other. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that the area of the north central Gangetic plain and the Nepalese Tarai, which came to be known as "the central country," or Madhyadesha, was one of the regions in which the two traditions came into active contact, and even conflict. The priests who were custodians of the Aryan tradition associated the eastward movement of Aryan civilization with the threat of a dissipation of the purity of Aryan culture and with the growth of unorthodox practices and attitudes.

The history of religions teaches that, when two very different traditions like

those of the Indus Valley civilization and the Aryans come into contact and conflict, a tremendous potential is created for the growth of new attitudes and patterns of religious culture. The life and teaching of the Buddha can be usefully viewed in the context of this historical phenomenon. Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 2, there were significant social, economic, and political changes affecting the lives of the people of the region in the sixth century B.C.E. These naturally contributed to a heightened level of religious consciousness. It has consistently been the case that, in times of major social, economic, and political change, people tend to look inward for safety and security in an ever more uncertain world. They instinctively look to religion—and to the ostensibly unchanging values embodied in religious belief and practice—for stability in the midst of uncertainty. Such periods have almost always produced great religious revolutions and revivals. This was most certainly the case in sixth century India, just as it was in China in the sixth century, and just as it was at the beginning of the Christian era in the Mediterranean world.

There are three values of paramount importance that emerge from the life of the Buddha: (1) renunciation, (2) love and compassion, and (3) wisdom. These values stand out very clearly in many episodes throughout his life. It is no coincidence that these three, taken together, are the essential requisites for the attainment of nirvana, or enlightenment. According to the teaching of Buddhism, there are three afflictions which cause us to be reborn again and again in the wilderness of cyclical existence—namely, attachment, aversion, and ignorance. These afflictions are eliminated by the correctives of renunciation, love and compassion, and wisdom, respectively. Through cultivating these three attitudes, the Buddhist practitioner is able to remove the afflictions and attain enlightenment. Consequently, it is no accident that these attitudes should feature so prominently in the life of the Buddha Shakyamuni.

Let us consider these essential attitudes one by one, beginning with

renunciation. As in the case of love and compassion, the first signs of renunciation manifested themselves very early in the life of the Buddha. Basically, renunciation is the recognition that all existence is permeated by suffering. When you realize this, it leads to what we might call a turning about, that is to say, the realization that all of common life is permeated by suffering causes us to look for something more or something different. This is precisely why suffering is counted as the first of the Four Noble Truths, and why the clear recognition of the reality and universality of suffering is the essence of renunciation.

Now, as it happens, Prince Siddhartha is believed to have participated, as we might expect, in the annual plowing ceremony of his clan at the tender age of seven. It was then that, while watching the proceedings, the young prince noticed a worm that had been unearthed being devoured by a bird. This casual observation led Siddhartha to contemplate the realities of life—to recognize the inescapable fact that all living beings kill one another to survive, and that this is a great source of suffering. Already, at this early age, we find in the Buddha's biography the beginning of the recognition that life as we know it is permeated by suffering.

If we look again at the biographical accounts of Siddhartha's early life, we soon come to the famous episode of the four sights that moved him to renounce the life of a householder and adopt the life of an ascetic in order to seek the truth. Seeing an old man, a sick man, and a corpse led him to consider why it was that he should feel unsettled by these sights. Clearly, he himself was not immune to these conditions but was subject to the inevitable succession of old age, sickness, and death. This recognition led the prince to develop a sense of detachment from the ephemeral pleasures of this world and prompted him to seek the ultimate truth about existence by way of renunciation.

It is important to remember at this stage that the prince's renunciation was not

prompted by despair occurring in the ordinary course of life. He enjoyed the greatest possible happiness and privilege known in his day, and yet he recognized the suffering inherent in sentient existence and realized that, no matter how much we may indulge ourselves in pleasures of the senses, eventually we must face the realities of old age, sickness, and death. Understanding this—and encouraged by the fourth sight, that of an ascetic—Siddhartha was moved to renounce the life of a householder and to seek ultimate truth for the benefit of all living beings.

Let us look next at the attitude of love and compassion, which also appears very early in the life of the Buddha. The most striking example is the episode of the wounded swan. The biographical accounts tell us that the prince and his cousin Devadatta were wandering in the park that surrounded the royal residence when Devadatta shot down a swan with his bow and arrow. Both youths ran toward where the swan had fallen, but Siddhartha, being the faster runner, reached the place first. The young prince gathered the wounded bird up in his arms and sought to allay its suffering. Devadatta reacted angrily to this, insisting that the swan belonged to him, inasmuch as he had shot it down. The youths took their dispute to the wise man of the court, who decided to award the bird to Siddhartha on the grounds that life rightly belongs to him who would preserve it and not to him who would destroy it.

In this simple story, we have an excellent example of the Buddha's early manifestation of the attitude of love and compassion, an attitude whose object is to foster as far as possible the happiness of others and to allay their suffering. Later, also, after his enlightenment, the Buddha continued to demonstrate this attitude in remarkable ways. There is, for instance, the well-known episode wherein the Buddha took it upon himself to nurse the ailing monk Tissa. The latter's illness was such as caused all the other members of the Order to shun him. However, the Buddha,

resolved to lead by example, personally cleaned and cared for Tissa's diseased and decaying body, thereby alleviating his suffering.

Last, let us take a long look at the attitude of wisdom, which is the most important of the three, being commensurate with enlightenment itself. It is wisdom that finally opens the door to freedom, and wisdom that removes ignorance, the fundamental cause of suffering. It is said that while one may sever the branches of a tree and even cut down its trunk, if the root is not removed, the tree will grow again. In a similar way, although one may remove attachment by means of renunciation, and aversion by means of love and compassion, as long as ignorance is not removed by means of wisdom, attachment and aversion are liable to arise again.

The principal instrument through which wisdom may be gained is meditation. Again, there is an event early in the Buddha's life in which his precocious skill in concentrating the mind is evident. According to the accounts of the life of Shakyamuni, immediately after witnessing the unhappy incident involving the worm and the bird at the plowing ceremony, the prince sat under a nearby rose-apple tree, and there spontaneously began to meditate, achieving the first level of meditation by concentrating his mind on the process of inhalation and exhalation. In this event we have evidence of a very early experience of meditation in the life of the Buddha.

Later, when he renounced the life of a householder and went forth to seek the ultimate truth, one of the first disciplines he developed was that of meditation. The accounts tell us that the ascetic Gotama (as he was known during his six years of striving for enlightenment) studied under two renowned teachers of meditation, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. Under the tutelage of these teachers he studied and mastered the various techniques of concentrating the mind. In Chapter 2 I mentioned that there is evidence which suggests that the origins of meditation go

back to the dawn of Indian civilization, to the golden age of the Indus Valley civilization. It is very likely that the two teachers mentioned in the biographies of the Buddha were exponents of this very ancient tradition of meditation, or mental concentration.

And yet, remarkably, the ascetic Gotama left the two teachers in question because he found that meditation alone could not permanently put an end to suffering, even though it might supply temporary relief. This fact is important, because although the teaching of the Buddha emphasizes the practice of mental development and is therefore clearly in the tradition of the Indus Valley civilization, the Buddha transcended the limited goals of mere meditation and brought a new dimension to religious experience. This is what distinguishes the Buddha's teaching from the teaching of many other Indian schools, particularly those which, in one form or another, embrace the practice of yoga, or meditation.

In short, what distinguishes Buddhism from the contemplative traditions of Hinduism and other religions is the fact that, for Buddhism, meditation by itself is not enough. We might say that, for Buddhism, meditation is like sharpening a pencil. We sharpen a pencil for a purpose, let us say, in order to write. Similarly, by means of meditation we sharpen the mind for a definite purpose—in this case, the purpose is wisdom. The relationship between meditation and wisdom has also been explained with the help of the example of a torch. Suppose we want to see a picture on the wall of a darkened room with the aid of a torch. If the light cast by the torch is too dim, if the flame is disturbed by drafts of air, or if the hand holding the torch is unsteady, it is impossible to see the picture clearly. Similarly, if we want to penetrate the darkness of ignorance and see into the real nature of existence, we will be unable to do so if our minds are weak, distracted, and unsteady as a consequence of habitual indolence and emotional and intellectual disturbances. The Buddha put this

discovery into practice on the night of his enlightenment. Then, we are told, he made his mind concentrated, one-pointed, and supple by means of meditation, directed it to the understanding of the real nature of things, and comprehended the truth. Therefore, the enlightenment of the Buddha was the consequence of the combination of meditation and wisdom.

There are also other dimensions of wisdom exemplified in the life of the Buddha. One of these is the understanding of the Middle Way. The conception of the Middle Way is central in Buddhism and has many levels of meaning, all of which it is not possible to consider here. However, this much may be said at once: The most fundamental meaning of the Middle Way is the avoidance of the extremes of indulgence in pleasures of the senses and, alternatively, tormenting the body. This fundamental aspect of the Middle Way is illustrated in the life of the Buddha by his very own career and experience. Before his renunciation of the life of a householder, Siddhartha enjoyed a life of luxury and sensual pleasure. Later, when he had become an ascetic in search of the truth, he spent six years practicing all manner of physical deprivations and self-mortification. Eventually, he understood the futility of such practices as well as the meaninglessness of his former life of indulgence, and discovered the Middle Way that avoids both extremes.

There are, of course, many other important episodes in the life of the Buddha that would be interesting and valuable to discuss, but my point in choosing to concentrate on these few elements is simply that we can begin to look at the Buddha's life as a lesson in conduct and concept, and not simply as a biography containing a number of names and places. Then we can appreciate the attitudes exemplified in Shakyamuni's career. In this way, a greater and more genuine insight into the real significance of the life of the Buddha becomes possible.

CHAPTER FOUR
The Four Noble Truths

With this chapter, we enter the real heart of the teaching of the Buddha. The Four Noble Truths are one of the most fundamental of the schemes delineated by the Buddha. In many important particulars, they virtually coincide with the whole of the doctrine of Shakyamuni. The understanding of the Four Noble Truths is synonymous with the attainment of the goal of Buddhist practice. The Buddha himself indicated as much when he said that it is failure to comprehend the Four Noble Truths that has caused us to run on so long in the cycle of birth and death. The importance of the Four Noble Truths is similarly indicated by the fact that the Buddha's first discourse, delivered to the five ascetics at the Deer Park, near Benares, was the *Dhammachakkappavattana Sutta,* which had as its subject the Four Noble Truths and the Middle Way. In the formula of the Four Noble Truths—that is, the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path—we have a summary of the teaching of the Buddha in theory and in practice.

Before turning to a consideration of the Four Noble Truths individually, I would like to draw your attention to a few facts about the formula in general. In this context, it is appropriate to recall that the ancient science of medicine had enjoyed a certain degree of development by the time of the Buddha. One of the fundamental formulas evolved by practitioners of the science of medicine in ancient India was the fourfold scheme of disease, diagnosis, cure, and treatment. If you consider carefully

these four stages in the practice of the science of medicine, it will be apparent that they correspond very closely to the formula of the Four Noble Truths: (1) the truth of suffering clearly corresponds to the first element of disease; (2) the truth of the cause just as clearly corresponds to the element of diagnosis; (3) the truth of cessation corresponds to the achievement of a cure; and (4) the truth of the path just as clearly corresponds to the course of treatment of a disease.

Having said this about the therapeutic nature of the formula of the Four Noble Truths and its resemblance to the formula evolved by ancient practitioners of the science of medicine in India, I would like to make another point which, although conceptual, is nonetheless very important for a correct understanding of the Four Noble Truths. When Sariputta, who was to become one of the Buddha's most outstanding disciples, came upon Assaji, one of the first five ascetics to embrace the Buddha's teaching, he asked him about it. Assaji is said to have replied that he could not tell Sariputta much about the Buddha's teaching because he was relatively new to it. Nonetheless, Assaji went on to give a summary of the teaching of the Buddha that goes something like this: "Of things that proceed from a cause, their cause the Tathagata has told, and also their cessation; thus teaches the great ascetic." The accounts report that Sariputta was greatly impressed by the few words spoken by Assaji. He went to find his friend and fellow seeker-after-truth Moggallana, and the two of them sought out the Buddha and became his disciples.

Assaji's very brief summary of the teaching of the Buddha tells us something about the central conception that lies behind the formula of the Four Noble Truths: it indicates the importance of the relationship between cause and effect. The concept of cause and effect lies at the heart of the teaching of the Buddha, and it also lies at the heart of the formula of the Four Noble Truths. In what way? The formula of the Four Noble Truths begins with a problem, namely, the first of the four noble truths, the

truth of suffering. The problem of suffering arises from causes, causes expressed in the second noble truth, the truth of the cause of suffering. Similarly, there exists an end of suffering expressed in the third noble truth, the truth of cessation, and a cause of the end of suffering, that is to say the path, which is the last of the four truths. In the fourth noble truth the cause is absence: in other words, when the causes of suffering are removed, the absence of such causes is the cause of the cessation of suffering.

If you look more closely at the Four Noble Truths, you will see that they divide quite naturally into two groups. The first two truths, those of suffering and its cause, belong to the realm of birth and death. Symbolically, they can be pictured in the form of a circle, because they operate in a circular manner. The causes of suffering produce suffering, and suffering in turn produces the causes of suffering, which in their turn again produce suffering. This is the cycle of birth and death, or samsara.

The latter two truths, the truth of the cessation of suffering and the truth of the path, do not belong to the realm of birth and death. They can be represented figuratively through the image of a spiral, in which the movement is no longer merely circular but is now directed upward, so to speak, toward another plane of experience.

To return for a moment to the conception of cause and effect in the context of the Four Noble Truths, it is clear that these four truths stand in a causal relationship, one to another, within each of the two groups just indicated: the first of the four (the truth of suffering) is the effect of the second (the truth of the cause), while the third (the truth of cessation) is the effect of the last of the truths (the truth of the path).

If we remember the importance of the relationship between cause and effect when we consider the Four Noble Truths, I believe we will find them easier to understand. Likewise, if we recall the importance of the principle of cause and effect,

it will be of great help to us as we proceed in our survey of the fundamental teaching of the Buddha, whether in the context of the study of karma and rebirth or that of interdependent origination. In short, we will find that the principle of cause and effect runs like a thread throughout the whole of the teaching of the Buddha.

Let us now turn our attention to the first of the Four Noble Truths, the truth of suffering. Many non-Buddhists and even some Buddhists find the choice of suffering as the first of the four truths disturbing. It is said that such a choice is indicative of pessimism. I have often had people ask me why Buddhism is so pessimistic. Why does it choose to begin with the truth of suffering? There are a number of ways this question may be answered. Let us consider, for a moment, the attitudes of pessimism, optimism, and realism. In practical terms, let us suppose that someone is suffering from a serious illness but refuses to recognize the truth of his condition. His attitude may be optimistic, but it is also surely foolish, inasmuch as it precludes taking any measures to remedy the disease. Such an attitude is analogous to that of the ostrich who, it is said, buries its head in the sand and so convinces itself that no danger threatens it. If a problem exists, the only sensible course of action is to recognize the problem and then do whatever is necessary to eliminate it.

The Buddha's insistence on the need to recognize the truth of suffering is therefore neither pessimistic nor optimistic: it is simply realistic. Besides, if the Buddha had taught only the truth of suffering and had stopped there, then there might be some truth in the charge that his teaching is pessimistic. However, the Buddha only began with the truth of suffering. He went on to teach the truth of the cause of suffering and, even more importantly, the truths of its cessation and of the means to achieve its cessation.

I am quite sure that, if we are honest with ourselves, all of us will admit that there is a fundamental problem with life. Things are not quite as they should be. No

matter how much we may try to run away from this fact, at some time or other—perhaps in the middle of the night, in a crowd of people, or for just a moment during an ordinary working day—we do come face to face with the reality of our situation. We realize that something, after all, is wrong somewhere. This experience is what impels people to seek solutions to the fundamental problems of unhappiness and frustration. Sometimes these solutions are only apparent, like the attempt to eliminate unhappiness by accumulating more and more possessions. Alternatively, people may seek solutions to the fundamental problems of life in various forms of therapy.

In Buddhism, the truth of suffering can be divided into two categories. These are, broadly speaking, physical and mental. Physical suffering includes the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death. You will recall that in Chapter 3 we mentioned Prince Siddhartha's encounter with the facts of old age, sickness, and death in the shape of the three sights of an old man, a sick man, and a corpse. Here, we find a fourth form of suffering added, the suffering of birth. Birth is suffering both because of the physical pain experienced by the infant and because it is from birth that the other forms of suffering, such as old age, inevitably follow. Birth may be said to be a gateway through which the other sufferings naturally follow. I think we need hardly spend much time on the sufferings of old age, sickness, and death. We have all observed the suffering of old age, the inability to function effectively and think coherently. Most of us have experienced for ourselves the suffering of sickness, and even if we have had the good fortune always to be healthy, we have seen the suffering of others afflicted by disease. Again, we have all observed the suffering of death, the pain and the fear experienced by the dying person. These sufferings are an unavoidable part of life. No matter how happy and contented we may be at a particular moment, the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death are inevitable.

In addition to these physical sufferings, there are mental sufferings: the suffering of separation from what is dear to us, the suffering of contact with what we despise, and the suffering of frustrated desires. Often, in the course of our lives, we are separated from the people and places we love. The requirements of career or country sometimes force us to leave our homes and loved ones. Change and death can bring about separation from the people and places we love. Again, the course of our lives often brings us into contact with people and situations we would rather avoid, such as a colleague or superior at work who is antagonistic toward us. Such a situation can make our time at our place of work a genuine torment. The suffering of contact with what we despise can also take more extreme forms, such as the experiences of flood, fire, famine, persecution, war, and other natural and manmade disasters. Finally, most of us, some time or other, experience the suffering of frustrated desires. We experience such frustration when, for instance, we cannot obtain the things we want, be it a job, a car, a house, or even a partner.

These mental and physical sufferings are woven into the fabric of our human existence. But what about happiness? Is there no happiness at all in life? Of course there is; however, the happiness we experience in the course of our lives is impermanent. As long as we still enjoy youth and health, we may find happiness in a comfortable situation or in the company of someone we love, yet all these experiences of happiness are conditioned, and therefore impermanent. Sooner or later, we will experience suffering.

Now, if we really want to solve the problem of suffering, reduce and eventually eliminate it, we must identify its cause. If the lights go out and we want to eliminate the darkness, we must identify the cause of the problem. Is it a short circuit, has a fuse blown, or has the power supply been cut off? Similarly, once we have recognized the problem of suffering, we must look for its cause. Only by

understanding the cause of suffering can we do something to solve the problem.

What is the cause of suffering according to the Buddha? The Buddha taught that craving is the great cause of suffering. There are various kinds of craving: craving for pleasant experiences, craving for material things, craving for eternal life, and craving for eternal death. We all enjoy good food, our favorite music, pleasant company, and the like. Enjoying such things, we want more and more of them. We try to prolong such pleasant experiences and to experience them more and more often. Yet somehow we are never completely satisfied. We find, for instance, that when we are very fond of a particular type of food and eat it again and again, we soon get bored with it. We try another kind of food, like it, enjoy it, and still, after a while, we begin to get bored with it. We go on to look for something else. We even get tired of our favorite piece of music. We get tired of our friends. We look for more and more. Sometimes this chase after pleasant experiences leads to very destructive forms of behavior, like alcoholism and drug addiction. All this is craving for the enjoyment of pleasant experiences. It is said that trying to satisfy our craving for pleasant experiences is like drinking saltwater when thirsty: it only increases our thirst.

Not only do we crave pleasant experiences, we also crave material things. You can see this very clearly in children, although we all suffer from it. Take any small child into a toy shop and he or she will want every toy in the shop. Eventually persuaded by his parents, he will settle for one of the toys. Almost as soon as he has gotten it, he begins to lose interest in it. Without fail, within a few days the toy lies neglected in a corner of the room and the child wants another toy. But are we really very different from young children? Almost immediately after buying that new car, don't we begin to want another, even better one? When we move into a good house, don't we often think, "This house is all right, but it would be still better if I could find a bigger one, say one with a garden, or one with a swimming pool?" It goes on and

on, whether it is a set of trains, a bicycle, a video recorder, or a Mercedes Benz.

It is said that the craving for acquiring wealth and material things involves three major problems that cause suffering. The first is the problem of getting them. You have to work hard, perhaps skimp and save, to buy the new car you wanted. Next, you have to look after it and protect it. You worry that someone may damage your car. You worry that your new house may catch fire or be damaged by the wind or rain. Finally, there is the problem of losing possessions, because sooner or later they will fall apart or we ourselves will die.

Craving for existence or eternal life is a cause of suffering. We all crave existence, life. Despite all the suffering and frustration we experience, we all crave existence, and it is this craving which causes us to be born again and again. Then there is the craving for nonexistence, that is to say, the craving for annihilation, which we might call a desire for eternal death. This craving expresses itself in nihilism, suicide, and the like. Craving for existence is one extreme, while craving for nonexistence is the other.

At this point you may be asking yourself, "Is craving alone a sufficient cause of suffering? Is craving alone enough to explain suffering? Is the answer as simple as that?" The answer is no. There is something that goes deeper than craving, something that is, in a sense, the foundation or ground of craving—namely, ignorance.

Ignorance is not seeing things as they really are. It is failing to understand the truth about life. Those who consider themselves well educated may find it offensive to be told they are ignorant. In what sense are we ignorant? Let me say this: without the right conditions, without the right training and the right instruments, we are unable to see things as they really are. None of us would be aware of radio waves were it not for the radio receiver. None of us would be aware of bacteria in a drop of

water were it not for the microscope, or of subatomic reality were it not for the latest techniques of electron microscopy. All these facts about the world in which we live are observed and known only because of special conditions, training, and instruments.

When we say that ignorance is failing to see things as they really are, what we mean is that, as long as we have not developed our minds—and, through them, wisdom—we remain ignorant of the true nature of things. We are familiar with the fear that we experience when we see an unidentified shape in the darkness by the side of the road while walking home alone late at night. The shape may actually be a tree stump, yet it is our ignorance that causes us to quicken our steps. Perhaps the palms of our hands begin to perspire; we may reach home in a panic. If there had been a light, there would have been no fear and no suffering because there would have been no ignorance about the shape in the darkness. We would have seen the tree stump for what it is.

In Buddhism we are concerned with ignorance about the nature of the self, soul, or personality. Such ignorance means regarding the self as real. This is the fundamental cause of suffering. We take our bodies or feelings or ideas to be a self, soul, or personality. We take them to be a real, independent ego, just as we take the tree stump to be a potential assailant. But once you assume this conception of a self, there naturally arises the conception of something apart from or other than your self. And once the conception of something different from your self occurs, you automatically regard it as either helpful to and supportive of your self or as hostile to it. Thus elements of the reality that you assume is different from your self are either pleasant or unpleasant, desirable or undesirable.

From the conceptions of self and something other than the self, craving and aversion naturally arise. Once we believe in the real existence of the self—in the real,

independent existence of the soul or personality apart from all the objects we experience as belonging to the external world—we then want those things we think will benefit us and shun those things we think do not benefit us or may even be harmful to us. Because of the failure to understand that in this body and mind there is no independent or permanent self, attachment and aversion inevitably thrive. From the root of ignorance grows the tree of craving, attachment, greed, aversion, hatred, envy, jealousy, and the rest. This entire tree of emotional afflictions grows from the root of ignorance and bears the fruit of suffering. Ignorance is the underlying cause of suffering, while craving, attachment, aversion, and the rest are the secondary or immediate causes of suffering.

Having identified the causes of suffering, we are now in a position to reduce and eventually eliminate suffering. Just as identifying the causes of a physical pain puts us in a position to eliminate that pain by means of eliminating its causes, so when we identify the causes of mental suffering, we are then able to reduce and eventually remove that suffering by removing its causes—ignorance, attachment, aversion, and so on. This brings us to the third of the Four Noble Truths, the truth of the end of suffering.

When we begin to talk about the end of suffering, the first obstacle we must overcome is the doubt that exists in some minds about whether or not the end of suffering is really possible. Can suffering really be ended? Is a cure really possible? It is in this context that confidence, or faith, plays an important role. When we speak of confidence or faith in Buddhism, we do not mean blind acceptance of any particular doctrine or creed. Rather, we speak of faith in the sense of admitting the possibility of achieving the goal of the end of suffering.

Unless we believe that a doctor can cure us of a physical pain, we will never seek his advice, never undergo the appropriate therapy, and may consequently die of an

illness that could have been cured had we only had sufficient confidence to seek help. Similarly, confidence in the possibility of being cured of mental suffering is an indispensable prerequisite to effective practice. Here, too, you may say, "How can I believe in the possibility of nirvana—the complete end of suffering, supreme happiness—if I have never experienced it?" But as I remarked earlier in this chapter, none of us would be able to hear radio waves were it not for the development of radio receivers, or see microscopic life were it not for the invention of the microscope. Even now, most of us have never observed subatomic reality, yet we accept its existence because there are those among us with the special training and appropriate instruments to observe it.

In this case, also, the possibility of attaining the complete end of suffering—namely, nirvana—ought not to be rejected simply because we have not experienced it ourselves. You may be familiar with the old story of the turtle and the fish. One day the turtle left the pond to spend a few hours on the shore. When he returned to the water, he told the fish of his experiences on dry land, but the fish would not believe him. The fish could not accept that dry land existed because it was totally unlike the reality with which he was familiar. How could there be a place where creatures walked about rather than swam, breathed air and not water, and so on? There are many historical examples of this tendency to reject information that does not tally with what we already are familiar with and believe. When Marco Polo returned to Italy from the East, he was imprisoned because his accounts of his travels did not corroborate what was then believed about the nature of the world. And when Copernicus advanced the theory that the sun does not circle the earth but vice versa, he was disbelieved and ridiculed.

Hence we ought to be careful not to dismiss the possibility of a complete end of suffering (the attainment of nirvana) just because we have not experienced it

ourselves. Once we accept that the end of suffering is possible, that a cure for our ills does exist, we can proceed with the steps necessary to achieve that cure. But unless and until we believe that a cure is possible, there is no question of successfully completing the needed therapy. Therefore, in order to realize progress on the path and—gradually, eventually—the complete end of suffering, we must at least have initial confidence in the bare possibility of achieving our goal.

When we refer to the third noble truth, the truth of the cessation of suffering, we have in mind this goal of the Buddhist path. The Buddha once said that, just as the ocean, although vast, is of one taste, the taste of salt, so also his teaching, although many-faceted and vast as the ocean, is of one taste, the taste of nirvana. As you will see, there are many facets to the teaching of Buddhism—the Four Noble Truths, the three ways of practice, interdependent origination, the three characteristics, and so on—but all have one goal in view, and that is the cessation of suffering. This is the goal that gives all the various facets of teaching that we find in Buddhism their purpose and direction.

The end of suffering is the goal of Buddhist practice, and yet the cessation of suffering is not exclusively transcendental or supra mundane. The point at issue here is an interesting one. If we consider, for instance, the question of the final goal of other faiths, such as the Semitic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, we find that there are two goals. One has its expression in this life and this world, in terms of building a kingdom of love, prosperity, and justice here and now; the other, higher goal consists of attaining heaven in the afterlife. In Buddhism, in contrast, the conception of the goal of practice is more comprehensive. The cessation of suffering of which the Buddha spoke is very broad in scope. When we speak of the end of suffering in Buddhism, we can mean (1) the end of suffering here and now, either temporarily or permanently; (2) happiness and good fortune in future lives; and/or

(3) the experience of nirvana itself.

Let us see whether this can be explained in greater detail. Suppose we happen to be in dire poverty, with insufficient food, shelter, clothing, medicine, education, and so forth. Such conditions constitute suffering just as surely as do birth, old age, sickness, death, separation from what we love, and so on. When we remedy the situation here and now, through greater prosperity and improved standards of living, our suffering is reduced. Buddhism teaches that the particular happiness or suffering that we experience in this life is the consequence of actions we have done in the past. In other words, if we find ourselves in fortunate conditions now, these advantages are the result of good actions done in the past. Similarly, those who find themselves in less fortunate conditions are suffering the consequences of unwholesome actions done in the past.

What does Buddhism offer in the way of the end of suffering? Practicing Buddhism in the short term results in relative happiness in this life. This happiness can be of a material nature, in the sense of improved physical conditions; it can be of an inner nature, in the sense of greater peace of mind; or it can be both. All this can be achieved in this very life, here and now. This is one dimension of the end of suffering. Being of this life, it might be roughly equated with what Christianity calls "the kingdom of God on earth."

In addition to this, the end of suffering in Buddhism means happiness and good fortune in the next life. This implies rebirth in fortunate circumstances, where we enjoy happiness, prosperity, health, well-being, and success, whether as a human being on this earth or as a celestial being in the heavens. We can liken this dimension of the end of suffering to the heaven of which the monotheistic religions speak. The only difference is that, in these religions, heaven once attained is permanent, whereas in Buddhism one's right to enjoy happiness has to be sustained and renewed. The

goal offered by Buddhism does initially mean happiness and prosperity in this life and in future lives. But it is also more than that, and here it differs from the other religions in question. Not only does Buddhism promise happiness and prosperity in this life and the next, it also offers liberation—nirvana, or enlightenment. This is the total cessation of suffering. It is the ultimate goal of Buddhism and it is also attainable here and now.

When we speak of nirvana we encounter certain problems of expression, because the exact nature of an experience cannot be communicated merely by speaking about it—rather, it must be experienced directly. This is true of all experience, whether it be the experience of the taste of salt, sugar, or chocolate or of one's first swim in the ocean. All these experiences cannot be described exactly. To make this point, suppose I have just arrived in Southeast Asia and am told of a very popular local fruit called durian. I can question people who live in the area and who regularly eat and enjoy durian, but how can they ever explain to me precisely what it is like to eat it? It is simply not possible to describe accurately the taste of a durian to someone who has never eaten one. We might try comparison or, alternatively, negation; we might say, for instance, that durian has a creamy texture or that it is sweet and sour, and add that it is something like jack fruit and not at all like apple. But it remains impossible to communicate the exact nature of the experience of eating durian. We find ourselves confronted with a similar problem when we try to describe nirvana. The Buddha and Buddhist teachers through the ages used similar devices to describe nirvana—namely, comparison, and negation.

The Buddha said that nirvana is supreme happiness, peace. He said that nirvana is immortal, uncreated, unformed; beyond earth, water, fire, and air, the sun and moon; unfathomable and immeasurable. Here we can see the various devices that Buddhism used to describe nirvana, such as the sort in which nirvana is likened to

something we experience in this world. For example, occasionally we are lucky enough to experience great happiness accompanied by profound peace of mind, and might imagine that we are experiencing a faint glimpse of nirvana. But a jack fruit is not really like a durian, and nirvana is not really like anything in this world. It is not like any everyday experience; it is beyond all the forms and names we might use, and in terms of which we experience the world.

The point is that, to understand what nirvana is really like, you must experience it for yourself, just as to know what durian is really like, you must eat it. No number of essays or poetic descriptions of durian will ever approach the experience of eating one. Similarly, we have to experience the end of suffering for ourselves, and the only way we can do this is by eliminating the causes of suffering—the afflictions of attachment, aversion, and ignorance. When we have eliminated such causes of suffering, then we will experience nirvana for ourselves.

How, then, can we remove these causes of suffering? What are the means by which we can remove the afflictions that are the causes of suffering? This is the path taught by the Buddha—the Middle Way, the path of moderation. You will recall that the life of the Buddha before his enlightenment falls into two distinct periods. The time before his renunciation was one in which he enjoyed every possible luxury; for example, the accounts tell us that he had three palaces, one for each season, filled with sources of pleasure to an extent scarcely imaginable in his day. This period of enjoyment was followed by six years of extreme asceticism and self-mortification, when he did without the basic amenities of normal life, lived out in the open, wore the poorest garments, and fasted for long periods of time. In addition to such deprivations, he tormented his body through various practices like sleeping on beds of thorns and sitting in the midst of fires under the cruel heat of the midday sun.

Having experienced the extremes of luxury and deprivation—and having

reached the limits of these extremes—the Buddha saw their futility and thereby discovered the Middle Way, which avoids both the extreme of indulgence in pleasures of the senses and the extreme of self-mortification. It was through realizing the nature of the two extremes in his own life that the Buddha was able to arrive at the ideal of the Middle Way, the path that avoids both extremes. As we shall see in the chapters to come, the Middle Way is capable of many significant and profound interpretations, but most fundamentally it means moderation in one's approach to life, in one's attitude toward all things.

We can use the example of the three strings of a lute to illustrate what we mean by this attitude. The Buddha had a disciple by the name of Sona who practiced meditation with such zeal that he encountered nothing but obstacles. Sona began to think of giving up his vows and abandoning the life of a monk. The Buddha, who understood his problem, said to him, "Sona, before you became a monk, you were a musician." Sona replied, "That is true." Then the Buddha said, "Being a musician, you should know which string of a lute produces a pleasant and harmonious sound: the string that is overly tight?" "No," replied Sona, "the overly tight string produces an unpleasant sound and is likely to break at any moment." "Then," said the Buddha, "is it the string that is slack?" "No," replied Sona, "the slack string does not produce a pleasant and harmonious sound. The string that produces a pleasant and harmonious sound is the string that is not too tight and not too loose." In this case, a life of indulgence and luxury may be said to be too loose, without discipline or application, whereas a life of self-mortification is too tight, too hard and tense, and likely to cause a breakdown of the mind and body, just as the overly tight string is likely to break at any time.

More specifically, the path to the Buddhist goal of the cessation of suffering is like a medical prescription. When a competent doctor treats a patient for a serious

illness, his or her prescription is not only physical but also psychological. If you are suffering, for instance, from a heart condition, you are not only given medication but are also asked to control your diet and avoid stressful situations. Here, too, if we look at the specific instructions for following the Buddhist path to the end of suffering, we see that they refer not only to one's body—actions and words—but also to one's thoughts. In other words, the Noble Eightfold Path, the path leading to the end of suffering, is a comprehensive path, an integrated therapy. It is designed to cure the disease of suffering through eliminating its causes, and it does so by means of treatment that applies not only to the body but to the mind as well.

Right understanding is the first step on the Noble Eightfold Path. It is followed by right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Why do we begin with right understanding? We do so because, to climb a mountain, we must have the summit clearly in view. In this sense, the first step on our journey depends on the last. We have to keep the goal clearly in view if we are to travel a path which can take us surely to that goal. In this way, right understanding gives direction and orientation to the other steps of the path.

We can see here that the first two steps of the path, right understanding and right thought, refer to the mind. Through right understanding and right thought, ignorance, attachment, and aversion can be eliminated. But it is not enough to stop there because, to achieve right understanding and right thought, we also need to cultivate and purify our minds and bodies, and the way to do this is through the other six steps of the path. We purify our physical being so that it will be easier to purify our minds, and we purify and develop our minds so that it will be easier to attain right understanding.

For the sake of convenience, the Noble Eightfold Path has been divided into the

three ways of practice: (1) morality, or good conduct (2) mental development, and (3) wisdom. The eight steps of the path are divided into these three ways of practice as follows: (1) right speech, right action, and right livelihood belong to the way of morality; (2) right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration belong to the way of mental development; and (3) right understanding and right thought belong to the way of wisdom.

Because it is necessary to purify our words and actions before we can purify our minds, we begin our progress along the path with morality, or good conduct. And because the Noble Eightfold Path is the means of reaching the goal of Buddhism, I will devote Chapters 5, 6, and 7 to these three ways of practice.

Chapter Five
Morality

In Chapter 4 we discussed the Four Noble Truths, our last topic being the fourth truth, which consists of the Noble Eightfold Path to the end of suffering. There we used the analogy of climbing a mountain, where the very first step depends on keeping the summit firmly in view, while the last step depends on being careful not to stumble at the outset. In other words, each part of the way depends on the other parts, and if any part of the path is not completed, the summit will not be gained. In the same way, in the case of the Noble Eightfold Path, all the steps are interrelated and depend on one another. We cannot do away with any one step.

Nonetheless, as mentioned at the end of Chapter 4, the eight steps of the path have been divided into three ways of practice: (1) morality, (2) mental development, and (3) wisdom. Although, conceptually and structurally speaking, the first step of climbing a mountain depends on the last and the last depends on the first, practically speaking, we do have to climb the lowest slopes first. We may be attracted to the summit, but to get there we must cross the lower slopes first; only then can we proceed to the higher reaches. It is for this very practical reason that the steps of the Noble Eightfold Path have been divided into these three ways of practice.

The first of these three ways of practice is morality. Morality forms the foundation of further progress on the path, of further personal development. It is said that, just as the earth is the basis of all animate and inanimate things, so morality is the basis of all positive qualities. When we look around us, we can see that

everything rests on the earth, from buildings to bridges, animals to human beings. The earth supports all these things; in the same way, morality is the foundation of all qualities, all virtues, all attainments, ranging from the mundane to the supramundane, from success and good fortune to skill in meditation and, ultimately, wisdom and enlightenment. By means of this analogy, we can easily understand the importance of good conduct as a fundamental prerequisite for following the path and achieving results on it.

Why do we take the trouble to stress the importance of good conduct as the foundation of progress on the path? The reason is that there is a tendency to think of good conduct as rather dull and boring. Meditation sounds more exciting and interesting, and philosophy and wisdom, too, have a kind of fascination about them. There is a dangerous temptation to neglect the importance of morality and want to go straight on to the more exciting parts of the path. But if we do not create this foundation of good conduct, we will not succeed in following the other steps of the path.

It is necessary to understand how the rules of good conduct, or the precepts, are established in Buddhism, because there are different ways in which moral or ethical codes can be presented. If you look at the moral teachings of the major religions of the world, you will find that there is a surprising degree of agreement among them. If you look, for instance, at the moral teachings of Confucius or Lao Tzu, at those of the Buddha and of Hindu teachers, and at those of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, you will find that the basic rules of good conduct are almost identical. However, although the rules in most cases correspond almost exactly, the attitudes toward these codes and the ways they are presented, understood, and interpreted differ considerably from faith to faith.

In general, there are two ways moral codes can be established—what we might

call the authoritarian way and the democratic way. A good example of the former is God handing down the tablets of the Ten Commandments to Moses on the mountain. By contrast, in Buddhism we have what I think we can call a democratic way of establishing the basic rules of good conduct. You may wonder why I say this when, after all, we do have rules of morality laid down in scriptures. You might ask, "Isn't this similar to God handing down the commandments to Moses?" I think not, because if we look more closely at the meaning of Buddhist scriptures, we can see what lies behind the rules of good conduct—namely, the principles of equality and reciprocity.

The principle of equality holds that all living beings are the same in their basic orientation and outlook. In other words, all living beings want to be happy, to enjoy life, and to avoid suffering and death. This is just as true of other living beings as it is of us. The principle of equality is at the heart of the universality of the Buddha's vision. Understanding the principle of equality, we are encouraged to act in light of the additional awareness of the principle of reciprocity.

Reciprocity means that, just as we would not like to be abused, robbed, injured, or killed, so all other living beings are unwilling to have such things happen to them. We can put this principle of reciprocity quite simply by saying, "Do not act toward others in a way you would not want them to act toward you." Once we are aware of these principles of equality and reciprocity, it is not hard to see how they form the foundation of the rules of good conduct in Buddhism.

Let us now look specifically at the contents of morality in Buddhism. The way of practice of good conduct includes three parts of the Noble Eightfold Path: (a) right speech, (b) right action, and (c) right livelihood.

Right speech constitutes an extremely important aspect of the path. We often underestimate the power of speech. As a consequence, we sometimes exercise very

little control over our faculty of speech. This should not be so. We have all been very greatly hurt by someone's words at some time or other in our lives, and similarly, we have sometimes been greatly encouraged by the words someone has said. In the area of public life, we can clearly see how those who are able to communicate effectively are able to influence people tremendously, for better or for worse. Hitler, Churchill, Kennedy, and Martin Luther King were all accomplished speakers who were able to influence millions with their words. It is said that a harsh word can wound more deeply than a weapon, whereas a gentle word can change the heart and mind of even the most hardened criminal. Perhaps more than anything else, the faculty of speech differentiates humans from animals, so if we wish to create a society in which communication, cooperation, harmony, and well-being are goals to be attained, we must control, cultivate, and use our speech in helpful ways.

All the rules of good conduct imply respect for values founded on an understanding of the principles of equality and reciprocity. In this context, right speech implies respect for truth and respect for the well-being of others. If we use our faculty of speech with these values in mind, we will be cultivating right speech, and through this we will achieve greater harmony in our relationships with others. Traditionally, we speak of four aspects of right speech—namely, the avoidance of (a) lying, (b) backbiting or slander, (c) harsh speech, and (d) idle talk.

Some of you may already be familiar with the Buddha's instructions to his son Rahula about the importance of avoiding lying. He used the example of a vessel. The vessel had a little bit of water in the bottom, which he asked Rahula to look at, commenting, "The virtue and renunciation of those who are not ashamed of lying is small, like the small amount of water in the vessel." Next, the Buddha threw away the water in the vessel and said, "Those who are not ashamed of lying throw away their virtue, just as I have thrown away this water." Then the Buddha showed Rahula

the empty vessel and said, "Just as empty is the virtue and renunciation of those who habitually tell lies."

In this way the Buddha used the vessel to make the point that our practice of wholesome actions, our good conduct and character, are intimately affected by lying. If we are convinced that we can act in one way and speak in another, then we will not hesitate to act badly, because we will be confident that we will be able to cover up our harmful actions by lying. Lying therefore opens the door to all kinds of unwholesome acts.

Slander is divisive. It creates quarrels between friends, and it creates pain and discord in society. Therefore, just as we would not like to have our friends turned against us by someone's slanderous talk, so we ought not to slander others.

Similarly, we ought not to abuse others with harsh words. On the contrary, we should speak courteously to others, as we would like them to speak to us.

When we come to idle talk, you may wonder why we cannot even engage in a little chitchat. But the prohibition against idle talk is not absolute or general. The kind of idle talk meant here is malicious gossip—that is, diverting ourselves and others by recounting people's faults and failings.

In short, why not simply refrain from using the faculty of speech—which, as we have seen, is so powerful—for deception, creating divisions among others, abusing others, and idling away time at their expense? Instead, why not use it constructively—for communicating meaningfully, uniting people, encouraging understanding between friends and neighbors, and imparting helpful advice? The Buddha once said, "Pleasant speech is as sweet as honey; truthful speech is beautiful, like a flower; and wrong speech is unwholesome, like filth." So let us try, for our own good and the good of others, to cultivate right speech—namely, respect both for truth and for the welfare of others.

The next part of the Noble Eightfold Path that falls into the category of morality is right action. Right action implies (a) respect for life, (b) respect for property, and (c) respect for personal relationships. You will recall what I said a moment ago about life being dear to all. It is said in the *Dhammapada* that all living beings tremble at the prospect of punishment, all fear death, and all love life. Hence, again keeping in mind the principles of equality and reciprocity, we ought not to kill living beings. You might be ready to accept this for human beings but demure with regard to some other living creatures. Here, however, some of the developments in recent years in the fields of science and technology ought to give the most skeptical freethinker food for thought. For instance, when we destroy a particular strain of insect, are we absolutely certain of accomplishing the greatest, long-term good of all, or do we, more often than not, instead contribute unwittingly to an imbalance in the ecosystem that will create even greater problems in the future?

Respect for property means not to rob, steal from, or cheat others. This is important because those who take what is not given by force, stealth, or treachery are guilty of breaking this precept. The employer who does not pay his employee an honest wage, commensurate with the work performed, is guilty of taking what is not given; the employee who collects his salary but shirks his duties is equally guilty of lack of respect for property.

Finally, respect for personal relationships means, first of all, to avoid sexual misconduct. Put most simply, it means avoiding adultery. Beyond that, it means avoiding sexual liaisons with people who are liable to be harmed by such relations. More generally, it means avoiding abuse of the senses. You can easily see how, if these guidelines are followed in a given community, such a community will be a better place in which to live.

Right livelihood is the third step of the Noble Eightfold Path included in the way

of practice of morality. Right livelihood is an extension of the rules of right action to our roles as breadwinners in society. We have just seen that, in the cases of right speech and right action, the underlying values are respect for truth, for the welfare of others, and for life, property, and personal relationships. Right livelihood means earning a living in a way that does not violate these basic moral values.

Five kinds of livelihood are discouraged for Buddhists: trading in animals for slaughter, slaves, arms, poisons, and intoxicants (drugs and alcohol). These five are not recommended because they contribute to the ills of society and violate the values of respect for life and for the welfare of others. Dealing in animals for slaughter violates the value of respect for life. Dealing in slaves violates both respect for life and right action in personal relationships. Dealing in arms also violates the value of respect for life, while dealing in poisons or intoxicants also does not respect the lives and welfare of others. All these trades contribute to insecurity, discord, and suffering in the world.

How does the practice of good conduct, or morality, work? We have said that, in the context of society at large, following the rules of good conduct creates a social environment characterized by harmony and peace. All our social goals can be achieved within the rules of good conduct based on the fundamental principles of equality and reciprocity. In addition, each person benefits from the practice of good conduct. In one of his discourses, the Buddha said that someone who has observed respect for life and so forth feels like a king, duly crowned and with his enemies subdued. Such a person feels at peace and at ease.

The practice of morality creates an inner sense of tranquillity, stability, security, and strength. Once you have created that inner peace, you can successfully follow the other steps of the path. You can cultivate and perfect the various aspects of mental development. You can then achieve wisdom—but only after you have created

the necessary foundation of morality both within and without, both in yourself and in your relationships with others.

Very briefly, these are the origin, contents, and goal of good conduct in Buddhism. There is just one more point I would like to make before concluding our review of Buddhist morality. When people consider the rules of good conduct, they often think, "How can we possibly follow them?" It seems to be terribly difficult to observe the precepts. For instance, even the prohibition against taking life, which is the most fundamental, appears very difficult to follow absolutely. Every day, as you clean the kitchen or putter about the garden, you are very likely to kill some insect that happens to get in your way. Also, it appears very difficult even to avoid lying in all cases. How are we to deal with this problem, which is a genuine one?

The point is not whether we can observe all the rules of morality all the time. Rather, the point is that, if the rules of morality are well founded (i.e., if the principles of equality and reciprocity are worth believing in, and if the rules of morality are an appropriate way of enacting them), then it is our duty to follow these rules as much as we possibly can. This is not to say that we will be able to follow them absolutely, but only that we ought to do our best to follow the way of practice indicated by the rules of good conduct. If we want to live at peace with ourselves and others, then we ought to respect the life and welfare of others, their property, and so on. If a situation arises in which we find ourselves unable to apply a particular rule, that is not the fault of the rule, but simply an indication of the gap between our own practice of morality and the ideal practice of it.

When, in ancient times, seafarers navigated their ships across the great oceans with the aid of the stars, they were not able to follow exactly the course indicated by those heavenly bodies. Yet the stars were their guides, and by following them, however approximately, mariners reached their destination. In the same way, when

we follow the rules of good conduct, we do not pretend that we can observe all of them all the time. This is why the five precepts are called "training precepts"; it is also why we renew them again and again. What we have in the rules of good conduct is a framework through which we can try to live in accord with the two fundamental principles that illuminate the teaching of the Buddha: the principle of the equality of all living beings, and the principle of reciprocal respect.

CHAPTER SIX
Mental Development

In this chapter we will look at the steps of the Noble Eightfold Path that fall into the group known as mental development. We have already noted the interdependent nature of the steps of the path, and in this context it is particularly important to understand the position of mental development. Placed as it is between good conduct and wisdom, mental development is relevant and important to both. You may ask why this should be so. Indeed, people sometimes think simply following the precepts of morality is sufficient for leading a good life.

There are several answers to this question. First of all, in Buddhism there is more than just one goal of the religious life. Besides the goal of happiness and good fortune, there is also the goal of freedom. If you want to attain freedom, the only way is through wisdom, and wisdom can only be gained by means of mental purification, which is achieved through meditation. But even for the sound practice of good conduct, mental development is helpful if not necessary. Why? Because it is relatively easy to follow the rules of morality when things are going well. If you have a good job, live in a stable society, and earn enough to support yourself and your family, it is relatively easy to observe the moral precepts. But when you find yourself in situations of stress, instability, and uncertainty—when, for instance, you lose your job, find yourself in circumstances where lawlessness prevails, and so forth—then observance of the rules of good conduct comes under attack.

In such circumstances, only mental development can safeguard your practice of

good conduct. By strengthening the capacity of the mind and by attaining control over it, mental development serves as a guarantor of the observance of the precepts, and at the same time it assists in the real objective of seeing things as they really are. Mental development prepares the mind to achieve wisdom, which opens the door to freedom and enlightenment. Mental development therefore has a distinctly important role in the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Buddhism's emphasis on the importance of mental development is not surprising when we remember the importance of mind in the Buddhist conception of experience. Mind is the single most important factor in the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddha himself put this very clearly when he said that the mind is the source of all things and that all things are created by the mind. Similarly, it has been said that the mind is the source of all virtues and other beneficial qualities.

To obtain these virtues and qualities, you must discipline the mind. The mind is the key to changing the nature of experience. It is said that, if we had to cover the whole surface of the earth with some soft yet resilient substance to protect our feet from being hurt by sticks and stones, it would be a very difficult undertaking indeed. But merely by covering the soles of our feet with shoes, it is as if the whole surface of the earth were thus covered. In the same way, if we had to purify the whole universe of attachment, aversion, and ignorance, it would be very difficult indeed, but simply by purifying our own minds of these three afflictions, it is—for us—as if we had purified the whole world of them. That is why, in Buddhism, we focus on the mind as the key to changing the way we experience things and the way we relate to other people.

The importance of the mind has also been recognized by scientists, psychologists, and even physicians. You may be aware of a number of visualization techniques now being used by therapists in the West. Psychiatrists and physicians

are successfully employing methods very similar to well-known techniques of meditation to help patients overcome mental disorders, chronic pain, and diseases. This approach is now an accepted practice within the therapeutic community.

We can all appreciate the influence the mind has on our own state of being by looking at our experience. We have all experienced happiness and know how it has a beneficial influence on our activities. When in such a state of mind, we are efficient, we respond appropriately, and we are able to function in the best possible way. On other occasions, when our minds are disturbed, depressed, or otherwise pervaded by harmful emotions, we find that we cannot even discharge simple tasks with care. In this way, we can all see how important the mind is in whatever sphere of our lives we care to consider.

Three steps of the Noble Eightfold Path are included in mental development: (a) right effort, (b) right mindfulness, and (c) right concentration. Together, these three encourage and enable us to be self-reliant, attentive, and calm.

In its most general sense, right effort means cultivating a confident attitude toward our undertakings. We can call right effort "enthusiasm," also. Right effort means taking up and pursuing our tasks with energy and a will to carry them through to the end. It is said that we ought to embark on our tasks in the same way an elephant enters a cool lake when afflicted by the heat of the midday sun. With this kind of effort, we can be successful in whatever we plan to do, whether in our studies, careers, or practice of the Dharma.

In this sense, we might even say that right effort is the practical application of confidence. If we fail to put effort into our various projects, we cannot hope to succeed. But effort must be controlled, it must be balanced, and here we can recall the fundamental nature of the Middle Way and the example of the strings of a lute. Therefore, effort should never become too tense, too forced, and, conversely, it

should not be allowed to become lax. This is what we mean by right effort: a controlled, sustained, and buoyant determination.

Right effort is traditionally defined as fourfold: (1) the effort to prevent unwholesome thoughts from arising, (2) the effort to reject unwholesome thoughts once they have arisen, (3) the effort to cultivate wholesome thoughts, and (4) the effort to maintain wholesome thoughts that have arisen. This last is particularly important, because it often happens that, even when we have successfully cultivated some wholesome thought, it is short-lived. Between them, these four aspects of right effort focus the energy of the mind on our mental states. Their object is to reduce and eventually eliminate the unwholesome thoughts that occupy our minds, and to increase and establish firmly wholesome thoughts as a natural, integral characteristic of our mental state of being.

Right mindfulness is the second step of the Noble Eightfold Path included in mental development, and is essential even in our ordinary, daily lives. Like the other teachings of the Buddha, this can best be illustrated with examples from everyday life itself. Indeed, if you look at the discourses of the Buddha, you will find that he consistently used examples that were familiar to his audience. Thus we might do well to look at the importance of mindfulness in our ordinary, mundane activities.

Mindfulness is awareness, or attention, and as such it means avoiding a distracted or cloudy state of mind. There would be many fewer accidents at home and on the road if people were mindful. Whether you are driving a car or crossing a busy street, cooking dinner or doing your accounts, it is done more safely and effectively when you are attentive and mindful. The practice of mindfulness increases our efficiency and productivity; at the same time, it reduces the number of accidents that occur due to inattention and general lack of awareness.

In the practice of the Dharma, mindfulness acts as a kind of rein upon our

minds. If we consider for a moment how our minds normally behave, we will clearly understand the need for some kind of rein, or control, in this context. Suppose that, as you are reading this book, a gust of wind suddenly causes a window to slam shut somewhere in the house. I am sure most of you would immediately turn your attention to the sound and, at least for an instant, focus your mind on it. At least for that instant, your mind would be distracted from the page. Similarly, at almost every moment of our conscious lives, our minds are running after objects of the senses. Our minds are almost never concentrated or still. The objects of the senses that so captivate our attention may be sights, sounds, or even thoughts. As you drive down the street, your eyes and mind may be captured by an attractive advertisement; while walking along the street, catching the scent of a woman's perfume, your attention may be momentarily drawn to it, and perhaps to the wearer. All these objects of the senses are causes of distraction.

Therefore, to manage the effects of such distractions on our minds, we need a guard that can keep our minds from becoming too entangled with such sense objects and with the unwholesome mental states they can sometimes arouse. This guard is mindfulness. The Buddha once told a story about two acrobats, master and apprentice. On one occasion, the master said to the apprentice, "You protect me, and I will protect you. In that way we will perform our tricks, come down safely, and earn money." But the apprentice said, "No, master, that will not do. I will protect myself, and you protect yourself." In the same way, each one of us has to guard his or her own mind.

Some people may say this sounds rather selfish. What about teamwork? But I think such doubts result from a fundamental misunderstanding. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. A team is only as effective as its individual members. A team of distracted people, incapable of discharging their own responsibilities

efficiently, will be an ineffective team. Similarly, to play an effective role in relation to our fellow beings, we must first guard our own minds. Suppose you have a fine car. You will be careful to park it in a place where it will not be damaged by another motorist. Even at work or at home, you will occasionally look out the window to make sure the car is all right. You will wash it often, and you will be certain to take it into the shop for servicing at regular intervals. You will probably insure it for a great deal of money. In the same way, each of us possesses one thing far more valuable than anything else he or she may have: a mind.

Recognizing the value and importance of our minds, we ought to guard them. This is mindfulness. This aspect of mental development can be practiced anywhere and at any time. Some people think meditation is too difficult to practice. They may even be afraid to try it. Usually, such people are thinking of formal meditation, that is, concentrating the mind while sitting in meditation. But even if you are not ready to practice the techniques of mental concentration, certainly right effort and right mindfulness can and should be practiced by everyone. The first two steps of mental development are simply (1) cultivating a confident attitude of mind, being attentive and aware; and (2) watching your body and mind and knowing what you are doing at all times.

As I write, at this very moment, with one corner of my mind I can keep an eye on my mind. What am I thinking of? Is my mind focused on the message I am trying to convey, or am I thinking about what happened this morning, or last week, or about what I will do tonight? I once heard a teacher remark that if you are making a cup of tea, then at that moment, Buddhism means making it well.

The heart of mental development is focusing the mind precisely on what you are doing at this very moment, whether it be going to school, cleaning the house, or conversing with a friend. No matter what you are doing, you can practice

mindfulness. The practice of mindfulness can be universally applied.

Traditionally, the practice of mindfulness has played an important role in Buddhism. The Buddha called mindfulness the one way to achieve the end of suffering. The practice of mindfulness has also been elaborated with regard to four specific applications: (i) mindfulness of the body, (ii) mindfulness of feelings, (iii) mindfulness of consciousness, and (iv) mindfulness of objects of the mind. The four applications of mindfulness continue to play an important role in the practice of Buddhist meditation to this very day.

But let us go on to consider the third step of mental development, namely, concentration, which is also sometimes called "tranquillity," or simply meditation. You will recall that we traced the origins of meditation all the way back to the Indus Valley civilization. Meditation, or concentration, has nothing to do with frenzy or torpor, much less with a semiconscious or comatose state. Concentration is merely the practice of focusing the mind single-pointedly on an object. This object can be either physical or mental. When complete, single-pointed concentration on an object is achieved, the mind becomes totally absorbed in the object to the exclusion of all mental activity—distraction, torpor, agitation, and vacillation. This is the objective of the practice of right concentration: to concentrate the mind single-pointedly on an object. Most of us have had intimations of this kind of state of mind in our everyday lives. Occasionally, something approaching single-pointedness of mind occurs spontaneously, when listening to a piece of music or watching the sea or sky. At such times you may experience a moment when the mind remains single-pointedly absorbed in an object, sound, or form.

Concentration can be practiced in a number of ways. The object of concentration may be visual (like a flame, an image, or a flower) or it may be an idea (such as love and compassion). When you practice concentration, you focus the mind repeatedly

on the selected object. Gradually, this leads to the ability to rest the mind on the object without distraction. When this can be maintained for a protracted period of time, you have achieved single-pointedness of the mind.

It is important to note that this aspect of mental development is best practiced with the guidance of an experienced teacher, because a number of technical factors can condition your success or failure. These include attitude, posture, and duration and occasion of practice. It is difficult to get all these factors right just by reading a book. Nonetheless, you need not become a monk to practice this kind of meditation. You need not live in a forest or abandon your daily activities. You can begin with relatively short periods of meditation, as short as ten or fifteen minutes a day.

Proficiency in this kind of meditation has two principal benefits. First, it leads to mental and physical well-being, comfort, joy, calm, and tranquillity. Second, it turns the mind into an instrument capable of seeing things as they really are. Thus it prepares the mind to attain wisdom.

The gradual development of the ability to see things as they really are through the practice of meditation has been likened to the development of special instruments by means of which we can now see subatomic reality and the like. In the same way, if we do not develop the potential of our minds through the cultivation of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, our understanding of the real state of things will remain at best intellectual knowledge. To turn our understanding of the Four Noble Truths from mere book knowledge into direct experience, we have to achieve single-pointedness of the mind.

It is at this point that mental development is ready to turn its attention to wisdom. Now we can clearly see the particular role of meditation in Buddhism. I touched on this briefly when I spoke about the Buddha's decision to leave the two teachers of meditation, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, and of his

combination of concentration and wisdom on the night of his enlightenment. Here, too, single-pointedness of mind by itself is not enough. It is like sharpening a pencil before proceeding to write, or sharpening an ax that we will use to cut off the trunk of attachment, aversion, and ignorance. When we have achieved single-pointedness of the mind, we are then ready to join concentration with wisdom in order to gain enlightenment.

CHAPTER SEVEN
Wisdom

With this chapter we will complete our survey of the steps of the Noble Eightfold Path. In Chapters 5 and 6 we looked at the first two groups, or ways, of practice, those of good conduct and mental development. Here we will look at the third way of practice, which is wisdom. At this point we find ourselves faced with an apparent paradox: in the list of eight steps of the path, right understanding and right thought occur first, yet in the context of the three ways of practice, the wisdom group comes last. Why should this be?

Earlier, we used the analogy of mountain-climbing to help explain the relationships among the steps of the path. When you set out to climb a mountain, you must have the summit in view. It is the sight of the summit that imparts the general direction to one's steps. For this reason, even at the very beginning of a climb, you must keep your eyes on the summit. Therefore, right understanding is listed at the very beginning of the steps of the path. Yet in practical terms, you have to climb the lower slopes and scale the intermediate reaches before you can gain the summit, which is the attainment of wisdom. In practical terms, therefore, wisdom comes only at the end of your practice of the path.

Wisdom is described as the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, the understanding of interdependent origination, and the like. What we mean when we say this is simply that the attainment of wisdom is the transformation of these doctrinal items from mere objects of intellectual knowledge into real, personal

experience. In other words, we want to change our knowledge of the Four Noble Truths and the like from mere book learning into actual, living truth. This goal is accomplished first through the cultivation of good conduct, and then specially through the cultivation of mental development.

Anyone can read in a book about the meaning of the Four Noble Truths, interdependent origination, and so forth, but this does not mean he or she has attained wisdom. The Buddha himself said that it was through failing to understand the Four Noble Truths and interdependent origination that we have all gone on in this cycle of birth and death for so long. Obviously, when he said this, he meant something deeper than simple failure to be acquainted intellectually with these items of doctrine.

The term "understanding" must thus be taken in the sense of right understanding, that is to say, direct and immediate understanding. It can be likened to a simple act of perception, like seeing a patch of blue color. Perhaps this is why the language of seeing is so often used to describe the attainment of wisdom. We speak of wisdom in terms of "seeing the truth" or "seeing things as they really are" because the attainment of wisdom is not an intellectual or academic exercise: it is understanding, or "seeing," these truths directly. When this kind of direct understanding of the nature of reality is gained, it is equivalent to the attainment of enlightenment. This opens the door to freedom from suffering and to nirvana.

In Buddhism, wisdom is the key to the realization of the goal of the religion. In some religions, we find that faith is paramount; in other traditions, meditation is supreme. But in Buddhism, faith is preliminary and meditation is instrumental. The real heart of Buddhism is wisdom.

Two steps of the Noble Eightfold Path are included in the wisdom group: (1) right understanding, and (2) right thought. Right understanding can be said to mean

seeing things as they really are—understanding the real truth about things, rather than simply seeing them as they appear to be. What this means in practical terms is insight, penetrative understanding, or seeing beneath the surface of things. If we wanted to explain this in doctrinal terms, we would have to speak about the Four Noble Truths, interdependent origination, impermanence, impersonality, and so forth. But for the moment, let us just talk about the means of gaining right understanding, leaving the contents of that understanding for another occasion. Here, again, the scientific attitude of the Buddha's teaching is evident, because when we examine the means of acquiring right understanding, we find that we begin with objective observation of the world around us and of ourselves. Moreover, objective observation is joined by inquiry, examination, and consideration.

In the course of acquiring right understanding, we find that there are two types of understanding: (i) understanding that we acquire by ourselves, and (ii) understanding that we acquire through others. The latter consists of truths that we are shown by others. Ultimately, these two types of understanding merge because, in the final analysis, real understanding (or, let us say, right understanding) has to be our own. In the meantime, we can, however, distinguish between the understanding we achieve through simple observation of the data of everyday experience and the understanding we achieve through study of the teachings.

Just as, in the case of our personal situations, we are encouraged to observe objectively the facts with which we are presented and then consider their significance, so, when we approach the teachings of the Buddha, we are encouraged first to study and then to consider and examine them. But whether we are talking about observation and inquiry into the truth about our personal experience or about the study and consideration of texts, the third and final step in this process of acquiring knowledge is meditation. It is at this point in the process of acquiring

knowledge that the two types of understanding I alluded to earlier become indistinguishable.

To summarize, the means of acquiring right understanding are as follows: (1) on the first stage, you have to observe and study; (2) on the second stage, you have to examine intellectually what you have observed and studied; and (3) on the third stage, you have to meditate on what you have examined and determined intellectually earlier. Let us use a practical example. Say we intend to travel to a certain destination. To prepare ourselves for the journey, we acquire a road map that shows the route we must follow to reach our destination. First we look at the map for directions; then we have to review what we have observed, examining the map to be sure we have understood the indications it gives. Only then can we actually make the journey to our intended destination. The final step in this process—making the actual journey—may be likened to meditation.

Alternatively, suppose you have bought a new piece of equipment for your home or office. It is not enough to read the instructions for its use once through. They must be reread and examined closely to be certain you understand what they mean. Only when you are sure you have understood them properly can you proceed to operate the new piece of equipment. The act of operating the equipment successfully is analogous to meditation. In the same way, to attain wisdom we must meditate on the knowledge that we have acquired through observation or study and further verified intellectually by means of examination. On the third stage of the process of acquiring right understanding, the knowledge we have gained previously becomes part of our living experience.

Next, we might spend a few moments considering the appropriate attitude to cultivate when approaching the teaching of the Buddha. It is said that, in doing so, we must avoid three flaws, which are explained with the example of a vessel. In this

context, we are the vessel, while the teaching is what has to be poured into it.

Now, suppose first that the vessel is covered with a lid: obviously, we will not be able to pour anything into it. This is analogous to the situation of someone who listens to the teaching with a closed mind, that is to say, a mind that is already made up. In such circumstances, the Dharma cannot enter into and fill his mind.

Again, suppose we have a vessel with a hole in the bottom: if we try to fill it with milk, the liquid simply runs out the hole. This is analogous to someone who does not retain what he hears, so that no amount of teaching is of any use.

Finally, suppose we fill the vessel with fresh milk before checking to see that it is clean, and there is some spoiled milk left in it from the previous day: the fresh milk that we pour into the vessel will naturally spoil as well. In the same way, if someone listens to the teaching with an impure mind, the teaching will be of no benefit. For example, someone who listens to the Dharma for selfish purposes, say because he wants to gain honor and recognition, is like a vessel already tainted with impurities.

We must all try to avoid these three flaws when we approach the teaching of the Buddha. The correct attitude to adopt in listening to the Dharma is that of a patient who pays careful attention to the advice of his physician. Here the Buddha is like the physician, the teaching functions as the medicine, we are the patient, and the practice of the teaching is the means by which we can be cured of the disease of the afflictions (attachment, aversion, and ignorance), which is the cause of our suffering. We will surely achieve some degree of right understanding if we approach the study of the Dharma with this attitude.

Right understanding itself is often divided into two aspects, or levels: an ordinary level, and a higher one. In Chapter 4, I mentioned the goals that Buddhism offers, which also belong to two different levels: the goal of happiness and prosperity belongs to this life and the next, while the goal of freedom, or nirvana, is the ultimate

aim of practice. The ordinary level of right understanding corresponds to this first, mundane goal of the practice of Buddhism, while the higher level of right understanding corresponds to the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice.

The first, ordinary aspect of right understanding is concerned with correct appreciation of the relationship between cause and effect, and pertains to moral responsibility for our behavior. Briefly stated, this means that we will experience the effects of our actions sooner or later. If we act well—preserving the values of respect for life, property, truth, and so forth—we will experience the happy effects of our good actions: in other words, we will enjoy happiness and fortunate conditions in this and in the next life. Conversely, if we act badly, we will experience unhappiness, misery, and unfortunate conditions in this life and in future lives.

The second, higher aspect of right understanding is concerned with seeing things as they really are, and pertains to the ultimate goal of the teaching of the Buddha. What do we mean when we say "see things as they really are"? Again, doctrinal answers can be given: to see things as they really are can mean seeing things as impermanent, as interdependently originated, as impersonal, and so forth. All these answers are correct. All have something to say about seeing things as they really are. But to arrive at an understanding of this first step—and, in a sense, the last step—of the Noble Eightfold Path, we must look for something that all these doctrinal expressions of right understanding have in common. What we find is that all these descriptions of the meaning of right understanding are opposed to ignorance, bondage, and entanglement in the cycle of birth and death.

The Buddha's attainment of enlightenment was essentially an experience of the destruction of ignorance. This experience is most frequently described by the Buddha himself in terms of understanding the Four Noble Truths and interdependent origination, both of which are concerned with the destruction of ignorance. In this

sense, ignorance is the central problem for Buddhism. The key conception in both the Four Noble Truths and interdependent origination is ignorance, its consequences and elimination.

Let us look again, for a moment, at the formula of the Four Noble Truths. The key to transforming our experience from the experience of suffering to that of the end of suffering is understanding the second noble truth, the truth of the cause of suffering. Once we understand the causes of suffering, we can act to achieve the end of suffering. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the Four Noble Truths are divided into two groups: the first, which includes the truth of suffering and the truth of the cause of suffering, is to be abandoned; the second, which includes the truth of the end of suffering and the truth of the path, is to be gained.

Understanding the cause of suffering enables us to accomplish this. This can be seen clearly in the Buddha's own description of his experience on the night of his enlightenment. When the Buddha perceived the causes of suffering—when he understood that attachment, aversion, and ignorance were those causes—this opened the door to freedom and enlightenment for him. Attachment, aversion, and ignorance are the causes of suffering. But if we want to restrict our examination to the most essential component, we must focus on ignorance, because it is due to ignorance that attachment and aversion arise.

Ignorance is the idea of a permanent, independent personality, or self. It is this conception of an "I," separate from and opposed to the people and things around us, that is the fundamental cause of suffering. Once we have the idea of such an "I," we have a natural inclination toward those things in our experience that sustain and support this "I," and a natural inclination away from those things that we imagine threaten this "I." It is this conception of an independent self that is the fundamental cause of suffering, the root of the various harmful emotions: attachment, aversion,

greed, anger, envy, and jealousy. It is ignorance of the fact that the so-called I, or self, is just a convenient name for a collection of ever-changing, interdependent, contingent factors that is at the bottom of all such emotional entanglements.

But is there a forest apart from the trees? The "I," or self, is just a common name for a collection of processes. When the self is taken to be real and independent, it is a cause of suffering and fear. In this context, believing in an independent self may be likened to mistaking a rope for a snake in the semidarkness. If we come upon a rope in a darkened room, we may assume the rope to be really a snake, and that assumption is a cause of fear. Similarly, because of the darkness of ignorance, we take the impermanent, impersonal processes of feeling, perception, and so forth to be a real, independent self. As a result, we respond to situations with hope and fear, desire certain things and are averse to others, are fond of some people and dislike others.

Therefore, ignorance is the mistaken idea of a permanent ego, or a real self. This teaching of impersonality, or not-self, does not contradict the doctrine of moral responsibility, the law of karma. In fact, you will recall that a moment ago we described right understanding in terms of two aspects—understanding the law of karma, and seeing things as they really are. Once the erroneous notion of the self, which is egocentrism, is dispelled by right understanding, then attachment, aversion, and the other emotional afflictions do not occur. When all these cease, the end of suffering is attained. I do not expect all this to be immediately clear. Indeed, I devote a number of chapters to the notion of ignorance in Buddhism, and to its correctives.

Let us go on, for the present, to the next step of the path that belongs to the wisdom group—namely, right thought. Here we can begin to see the reintegration, or reapplication, of the wisdom aspect of the path to good conduct, because thought has an immense influence on our behavior. The Buddha said that if we act and speak

with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow, whereas if we act and speak with an impure mind, suffering follows as the wheel of a cart follows the hoof of the ox that draws it.

Right thought means avoiding attachment and aversion. The causes of suffering are said to be ignorance, attachment, and aversion. While right understanding removes ignorance, right thought removes attachment and aversion; therefore, right understanding and right thought together remove the causes of suffering.

To remove attachment and greed we must cultivate renunciation, while to remove aversion and anger we must cultivate love and compassion. How do we go about cultivating the attitudes of renunciation and love and compassion, which act as correctives to attachment and aversion? Renunciation is developed by contemplating the unsatisfactory nature of existence, particularly the unsatisfactory nature of pleasures of the senses. Pleasures of the senses are likened to saltwater. A thirsty man who drinks saltwater in the hope of quenching his thirst only finds that it increases. The Buddha also likened sense pleasures to a certain fruit that has an attractive exterior and is fragrant and tasty, but that is poisonous if eaten. Similarly, pleasures are attractive and enjoyable yet cause disaster. Therefore, to cultivate renunciation, you must consider the undesirable consequences of pleasures of the senses.

In addition, we must appreciate the fact that the very nature of samsara, the cycle of birth and death, is suffering. No matter where we are born within that cycle, our situation will be saturated with suffering. The nature of samsara is suffering, just as the nature of fire is heat. Through understanding the unsatisfactory nature of existence and recognizing the undesirable consequences of pleasures of the senses, we can cultivate renunciation and detachment.

Similarly, we can develop love and compassion through recognizing the essential equality of all living beings. Like us, all living beings fear death and tremble

at the idea of punishment. Understanding this, we should not kill other living beings or cause them to be killed. Like us, all living beings desire life and happiness. Understanding this, we should not place ourselves above others or regard ourselves any differently from the way we regard others.

Recognition of the essential equality of all living beings is fundamental to the cultivation of love and compassion. All living beings desire happiness and fear pain just as much as we do. Recognizing this, we ought to regard all with love and compassion. Moreover, we ought to actively cultivate the wish that all living beings be happy and free from suffering. In this way we can all cultivate the beneficial attitudes of renunciation and love and compassion, which correct and eventually eliminate attachment and aversion. Finally, by means of the practice of the wisdom aspect of the path—which includes not only right thought but also right understanding—we can eliminate the afflictions of ignorance, attachment, and aversion, attaining freedom and the supreme happiness of nirvana, which is the ultimate goal of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Chapter Eight
Karma

With this chapter, we begin our consideration of two related concepts common in Buddhism: karma and rebirth. These concepts are closely connected, but because the subject is a large one, I intend to dedicate two chapters to it—this and the following one.

We have learned that the factors which keep us prisoners in samsara are the afflictions: ignorance, attachment, and aversion. We discussed this when we considered the second noble truth, the truth of the cause of suffering (see Chapters 4 and 7).The afflictions are something that every living being in the world has in common with every other living being, whether human, animal, or a being who dwells in realms that we cannot normally perceive.

All living beings are alike insofar as they are subject to the afflictions, yet there are many differences among living beings with which we are all familiar. For instance, some of us are wealthy while others are poor, some are strong and healthy while others are weak and diseased, and so forth. There are many differences among human beings, and there are even greater differences between human beings and animals. These differences are the result of karma. Ignorance, attachment, and aversion are common to all living beings, but the particular circumstances in which each living being finds himself are the effects of his particular karma, which conditions his specific situation.

Karma explains why some living beings are fortunate while others are less

fortunate, why some are happy while others are unhappy. The Buddha clearly stated that karma accounts for the differences among living beings. We might also recall that part of the Buddha's experience on the night of his enlightenment consisted of gaining an understanding of how karma determines the rebirth of living beings—how living beings migrate from happy to unhappy conditions, and vice versa, as a consequence of their particular karma. Therefore, it is karma that explains the differing circumstances in which individual living beings find themselves.

Having said this much about the function of karma, let us look more closely at what karma actually is: in other words, let us define it. Perhaps we can begin by deciding what karma is not. Often people misunderstand the meaning of karma. This is especially true in the everyday, casual use of the term. You often find people speaking resignedly about a particular situation and making use of the idea of karma to reconcile themselves to it. When people think of karma in this way, it becomes a vehicle of escape and assumes most of the characteristics of a belief in predestination, or fate. But this is most certainly not the correct meaning of karma. Perhaps this misunderstanding is a result of the idea of fate that is common in many cultures. Perhaps it is because of this popular belief that the concept of karma is often confused with and obscured by the notion of predestination. But karma is certainly not fate or predestination.

If karma is not fate or predestination, what is it? Let us look at the meaning of the term itself. Karma means "action," that is to say, the act of doing this or that. Immediately, we have a clear indication that the real meaning of karma is not fate; rather, karma is action, and as such, it is dynamic. But karma is more than just action, because it is not mechanical action, nor is it unconscious or involuntary action. On the contrary, karma is intentional, conscious, deliberate action motivated by volition, or will.

How can this intentional action condition our situation for better or for worse? It can do so because every action must have a reaction, or an effect. This truth has been enunciated with respect to the physical universe by the great classical physicist Newton, who formulated the scientific law that every action must have an equal and opposite reaction. In the sphere of intentional action and moral responsibility, there is a counterpart to this law of action and reaction that governs events in the physical universe—namely, the law that every intentional action must have its effect. For this reason, Buddhists often speak of intentional action and its ripened consequences or intentional action and its effect. Thus, when we want to speak about intentional action together with its ripened consequences, or effects, we use the phrase "the law of karma."

On the most fundamental level, the law of karma teaches that particular kinds of actions inevitably lead to similar or appropriate results. Let us take a simple example to illustrate this point. If we plant the seed of a mango, the tree that grows as a result will be a mango tree, which will eventually bear mangos. Alternatively, if we plant a pomegranate seed, the tree that grows as a consequence will be a pomegranate tree, and its fruit will be pomegranates. "As you sow, so shall you reap": according to the nature of our actions, we will obtain the corresponding fruit.

In the same way, according to the law of karma, if we perform a wholesome action, sooner or later we will obtain a wholesome fruit, or result, and if we perform an unwholesome action, we will inevitably obtain an unwholesome or unwanted result. This is what we mean when we say, in Buddhism, that particular causes bring about particular effects that are similar in nature to those causes. This will become perfectly clear when we consider specific examples of wholesome and unwholesome actions and their corresponding effects.

It may be understood from this brief, general introduction that karma can be of

two kinds: good or wholesome karma, and bad or unwholesome karma. To avoid misunderstanding these terms, it may be of use to look at the original words used to refer to so-called good and bad karma—namely, *kushala* and *akushala*, respectively. To understand how these words are used, it is necessary to know their actual meanings: *kushala* means "intelligent" or "skillful," whereas *akushala* means "unintelligent" or "unskillful." By knowing this, we can see that these terms are used in Buddhism not in the sense of good and evil, but in the sense of intelligent and unintelligent, skillful and unskillful, wholesome and unwholesome.

In what way are actions wholesome and unwholesome? Actions are wholesome in the sense that they are beneficial to oneself and others, and hence motivated not by ignorance, attachment, and aversion but by wisdom, renunciation or detachment, and love and compassion.

How can we know that a wholesome action will produce happiness, and an unwholesome action, unhappiness? The short answer is that time will tell. The Buddha himself explained that, as long as an unwholesome action does not produce its fruit of suffering, a foolish person will consider that action good, but when it does produce its fruit of suffering, then he will realize that the act was unwholesome. In the same way, as long as a wholesome action does not produce happiness, a foolish person may think that it was unwholesome; only when it does produce happiness will he realize that the act was good.

Thus we need to judge wholesome and unwholesome actions from the point of view of their long-term effects. Very simply, sooner or later wholesome actions result in happiness for oneself and for others, whereas unwholesome actions result in suffering for oneself and others.

Specifically, the unwholesome actions that are to be avoided are related to the so-called three doors of action—namely, body, voice, and mind. There are three

unwholesome actions of body, four of speech, and three of mind. The three unwholesome actions of body are (1) killing, (2) stealing, and (3) sexual misconduct; the four unwholesome actions of voice are (4) lying, (5) harsh speech, (6) slander, and (7) malicious gossip; and the three unwholesome actions of mind are (8) greed, (9) anger, and (10) delusion. By avoiding these ten unwholesome actions, we can avoid their consequences.

The general fruit of these unwholesome actions is suffering, which can, however, take various forms. The fully ripened fruit of unwholesome actions is rebirth in the lower realms, or realms of woe—the hell realms, the realm of hungry ghosts, and the realm of animals. If the weight of unwholesome actions is not sufficient to result in birth in the lower realms, then it results in unhappiness even though we are born as humans.

Here we can see at work the principle alluded to earlier—that of a cause resulting in a corresponding or appropriate effect. For instance, if we habitually perform actions that are motivated by ill-will and hatred, such as taking the lives of others, this will result in rebirth in the hells, where we will be repeatedly tortured and killed. If the unwholesome action of killing other living beings is not habitual and repeated, then such actions will result in a shortened life even though we are born as human beings. Otherwise, actions of this kind can result in separation from loved ones, fear, or even paranoia. In this case, also, we can clearly see how the effect is similar in nature to the cause. Killing shortens the life of those who are killed, depriving them of their loved ones and the like, so if we indulge in killing we will be liable to experience these same effects.

Similarly, stealing motivated by the afflictions of attachment and greed can lead to rebirth as a hungry ghost, where we are completely deprived of the things we want and even denied such essentials as food and shelter. And even if stealing does

not result in rebirth as a hungry ghost, it will result in poverty, dependence on others for our livelihood, and so forth. Sexual misconduct, for its part, will result in marital problems.

Thus unwholesome actions produce unwholesome results in the shape of various forms of suffering, whereas wholesome actions result in wholesome effects, or happiness. We can interpret wholesome actions in two ways, negatively and positively: we can regard wholesome actions as those that simply avoid the unwholesome ones (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and the rest), or we can think of wholesome actions in terms of generosity, restraint, meditation, reverence, service to others, transference of merit, rejoicing in the merit of others, listening to the Dharma, teaching the Dharma, and correction of our own erroneous views.

Here, again, the effects of actions are similar to their causes. For instance, generosity results in wealth, listening to the Dharma results in wisdom, and so on. Wholesome actions have effects that are similar in nature to their causes—in this case, wholesome, or beneficial—just as unwholesome actions have effects that are unwholesome, like the actions themselves.

Karma, whether wholesome or unwholesome, is modified by the conditions under which it is accumulated. In other words, a wholesome or unwholesome action may be more or less weighty depending on the conditions under which it is performed. The conditions that determine the weight or strength of karma may be divided into those that refer to the subject, or doer of the action, and those that refer to the object, or the being toward whom the action is directed. Hence the conditions that determine the weight of karma apply to the subject as well as the object of actions.

If we take the example of killing, five conditions must be present for the action to have complete, unmitigated strength: (a) a living being, (b) consciousness of the

existence of a living being, (c) the intention to kill the living being, (d) the effort or action of killing the living being, and (e) the consequent death of the living being. Here we can see conditions that apply to the subject as well as the object of the action of killing: the subjective conditions are consciousness of the existence of a living being, the intention to kill, and the action of killing a living being, while the objective conditions are the presence of a living being and the consequent death of that living being.

Similarly, there are five alternative conditions that modify the weight of karma: (i) persistence or repetition, (ii) willful intention, (iii) absence of regret, (iv) quality, and (v) indebtedness. Again, the five can be divided into subjective and objective categories. The subjective conditions are actions done with persistence, actions done with willful intention and determination, and actions done without regret or misgivings. If you perform an unwholesome action again and again, with willful intention and without regret or misgivings, the weight of that action will be increased.

The objective conditions are the quality of the object—that is, the living being toward whom the action is directed—and indebtedness, or the nature of the relationship that exists between the object of an action and the subject. In other words, if we perform a wholesome or unwholesome action toward a living being with extraordinary qualities, like an Arhat or the Buddha, the wholesome or unwholesome action will have greater weight. Finally, the strength of wholesome and unwholesome actions is greater when they are done toward those to whom we are indebted, like our parents, teachers, and friends who have benefited us in the past.

The subjective and objective conditions, taken together, determine the weight of karma. This is important, because knowing this will help us remember that karma is

not simply a matter of black and white or good and bad. Karma is, of course, intentional action and moral responsibility, but the working of the law of karma is very finely balanced so as to justly and naturally match the effect with the cause. It takes into account all the subjective and objective conditions that influence the precise nature of an action. This ensures that the effects of an action are similar and equal to the cause.

The effects of karma may become evident either in the short term or in the long term. Traditionally, karma is divided into three categories determined by the amount of time needed for its effects to manifest themselves: in this very life, in the next life, or only after many lives.

When the effects of karma manifest in this life, it is possible to see them within a relatively short space of time. The effects of this kind of karma can be easily and directly witnessed by any of us. For instance, when a person refuses to study, indulges in alcohol or drug abuse, or begins to steal to support his harmful habits, the effects are evident within a short space of time. They manifest themselves in the loss of his livelihood and friends, in ill health, and the like.

Although we ourselves cannot see the medium- and long-term effects of karma, the Buddha and his prominent disciples, who had developed their minds through the practice of meditation, were able to perceive them. For example, when Moggallana was attacked by bandits and came to the Buddha streaming with blood, the Buddha was able to see that the event was the effect of karma that Moggallana had accumulated in a previous life. Then, it seems, he had taken his aged parents into a forest and, having beaten them to death, reported that they had been killed by bandits. The effect of this unwholesome action, done many lifetimes before, manifested itself only in his life as Moggallana.

At the point of death, we have to leave everything behind—our property and

even our loved ones—yet our karma will follow us like a shadow. The Buddha said that nowhere on earth or in heaven can we escape our karma. When the conditions are present, dependent on mind and body, the effects of karma will manifest themselves, just as, dependent on the appropriate conditions, a mango will appear on a mango tree. We can see that, even in the natural world, certain effects take longer to appear than others. If we plant watermelon seeds, we obtain the fruit in a shorter period than if we plant the seeds of a walnut tree. In the same way, the effects of karma manifest themselves either in the short term or in the medium to long term, depending on the nature of the action.

In addition to the two principal varieties of karma, wholesome and unwholesome, we should mention neutral or ineffective karma. Neutral karma is action that has no moral consequences, either because the very nature of the action is such as to have no moral significance, or because the action was done involuntarily and unintentionally. Examples of this variety of karma include walking eating, sleeping, breathing, making handicrafts, and so on. Similarly, actions done unintentionally constitute ineffective karma, because the all-important volitional element is missing. For instance, if you step on an insect when completely unaware of its existence, such an act is considered neutral or ineffective karma.

The benefits of understanding the law of karma are obvious. In the first place, such an understanding discourages us from performing unwholesome actions that have suffering as their inevitable fruit. Once we understand that, throughout our entire life, each and every intentional act will produce a similar and equal reaction—once we understand that, sooner or later, we will have to experience the effects of our actions, wholesome or unwholesome—we will refrain from unwholesome behavior because we will not want to experience the painful results of such actions. Similarly, knowing that wholesome actions have happiness as their fruit, we will do our best to

cultivate such wholesome actions.

Reflecting on the law of karma, of action and reaction in the sphere of conscious activity, encourages us to abandon unwholesome actions and to practice wholesome ones. We will look more closely at the specific effects of karma in future lives, and at exactly how it conditions and determines the nature of rebirth, in the next chapter.

Chapter Nine
Rebirth

In this chapter, I will look at the effects of karma in the next life or, to put it another way, I will elaborate on the idea of rebirth. But before we begin to talk specifically about the Buddha's teaching on rebirth, we may do well to spend a little time on the concept of rebirth in general.

Rebirth is a concept with which many people have difficulty. This has been especially true over the past century or so, when we have become increasingly conditioned to think in what are regarded as scientific terms, that is to say, terms that many people naively take to be scientific. This attitude has caused many people to discard the idea of rebirth because they think that it smacks of superstition and belongs to an old-fashioned, outdated way of looking at the world. For this reason, I think we need to redress the balance by creating a degree of open-mindedness toward the concept of rebirth in general terms, before we begin to consider the Buddhist teaching on the subject.

There are a number of approaches we can adopt in attempting to make a case for the reality of rebirth. One line of argument is to recall that, in almost all the major cultures of the world at one time or another, there has been a strong popular belief in rebirth. This is particularly true of India, where the idea can be traced back to the very earliest period of Indian civilization. In India, all the major religions—theist or atheist, schools of Hinduism or unorthodox doctrines like Jainism—accept the truth of rebirth. In other cultures, too, belief in rebirth has been common. To take just one

example, in the Mediterranean world, belief in the reality of rebirth was widespread before and during the first few centuries of the common era. Even today, it persists among the Druze, a Middle Eastern sect of Islam. Consequently, belief in the reality of rebirth has been an important part of the human way of thinking about the world and our place in it.

Then there is the testimony of recognized authorities who belong to various religious traditions. In Buddhism, it was the Buddha himself who taught the truth of rebirth. We are told that, on the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha acquired three kinds of knowledge, the first of which was detailed knowledge of his own past lives. He recollected the conditions under which he had been born in the past, and was able to remember what his name and occupation had been in innumerable former lives. Besides the Buddha's testimony, we have that of his principal disciples, who were also able to recall their past lives. Ananda, for instance, acquired the ability to remember his past lives soon after he was ordained as a Buddhist monk. Similarly, throughout the history of the Buddhist tradition, accomplished practitioners have been able to remember their past lives.

Nonetheless, neither of these two arguments for the reality of rebirth can be expected to be wholly convincing in the rational and scientific environment in which we live, so perhaps we need to look a bit closer to home, so to speak. Here we receive help from a very unexpected source. Some of you may be aware of the fact that in the past three decades there has been a vast amount of scientific investigation of the question of rebirth. Such research has been undertaken by psychologists and parapsychologists. Through this research we have gradually built up a very convincing case for the reality of rebirth, a case developed along scientific lines. Many books have been published in which the details of these investigations are described and discussed.

One scholar who has been particularly active in this area in recent years is Professor Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia, in the United States. He has published his findings in about twenty cases of rebirth. One case, which has received widespread attention, is that of a woman who was able to recall her life lived more than a hundred years earlier in a foreign land, under the name of Bridey Murphy—a land she had never visited in her present life. I will not go into the specific details of cases here, because anyone interested in the scientific evidence for rebirth can read about it for him or herself. Nonetheless, I think we are now at a point where even the most skeptical among us must admit that there is a lot of circumstantial evidence in favor of the reality of rebirth.

In constructing a case for the reality of rebirth, however, we can also look even closer to home—namely, within our own experience. We need only recollect and examine that experience in the truly Buddhist way to see what conclusions we can derive from it. All of us have our own particular capabilities, our own particular inclinations and disinclinations, and I think it is fair to ask whether these are all really the result of chance and social conditioning in early life. For instance, some of us are more capable in sports than others. Some of us have a talent for mathematics, while others have a talent for music. Still others like swimming, while others are afraid of water. Are all such differences in our abilities and attitudes merely the result of chance and conditioning?

There are often dramatic and unexpected turns in the course of our personal development. Let me take my own case. I was born into a Roman Catholic family in the United States. There was absolutely nothing in my early background to indicate that I would have traveled to India by the age of twenty, and that I would spend the next two-and-a-half decades of my life predominantly in Asia, where I would become deeply involved in Buddhist studies.

Then, too, there are those situations in which we sometimes feel a strong presentiment that we have been in a particular place before, although we have not visited it in our present lifetime. On other occasions, we feel that we have known someone before: we meet a person for the first time, and yet very soon we feel that we have known that person all our lives. Alternatively, we can know someone else for years and still feel we do not really know him or her. Experiences such as these, when we feel that we have been in a particular situation before, are so common and universal that, even in the culture of contemporary France, which knows almost nothing of rebirth, there is a well-known phrase for them—the expression *déjà vu,* which means "already seen."

If we are not dogmatic, when we add up all these indications and suggestions—the belief in rebirth in many cultures and ages throughout the history of human civilization, the testimony of the Buddha and his prominent disciples, the evidence provided by scientific research, and our own personal intimations that we have been here before—I think we will have to confess that there is at least a strong possibility that rebirth actually is a reality.

In Buddhism, rebirth is part and parcel of the continuous process of change. Indeed, we are not only reborn at the time of death, we are reborn at every moment. This, like other important teachings of Buddhism, is easily verifiable by reference to our own experience and to the teachings of science. For example, the majority of cells that compose the human body die and are replaced many times during the course of a lifetime. Even those few cells which last an entire lifetime undergo continuous internal change. This is part of the process of birth, death, and rebirth. If we look at the mind, we find that mental states (such as worry, happiness, and the like) appear and disappear every moment. They pass away and are replaced by new and different states. Therefore, whether we look at the body or the mind, our experience is

characterized by constant birth, death, and rebirth.

Buddhism teaches that there are various realms, spheres, or dimensions of existence. Some texts list thirty-one such dimensions or planes of existence, but for our purposes we will make use of a simpler scheme, which refers to six such realms. These six realms can be divided into two groups, one that is relatively fortunate and the other, unfortunate. The first group includes the realm of the gods, the realm of the demigods, and the realm of human beings. Rebirth in these fortunate realms is the result of wholesome karma. The second group includes the realm of the animals, the realm of the hungry ghosts, and the hell realms. Rebirth in these realms of woe is the result of unwholesome karma.

Let us now look at each of these realms, beginning with the lowest. There are quite a few hell realms in Buddhism, including eight hot hells and eight cold hells. In the hells, living beings suffer incalculable and indescribable pain. It is said that the suffering experienced in this human world as a consequence of being pierced by three hundred spears in a single day is only a minute fraction of the suffering experienced by the denizens of hell. The cause of rebirth in hell is repeated violent behavior, such as habitual killing, cruelty, and the like.

Such actions are born of aversion, and living beings who commit them suffer the pains of hell until the unwholesome karma they have generated through such actions is exhausted. This last point is important, because it gives us occasion to note that, in Buddhism, no one suffers eternal damnation. When their unwholesome karma is exhausted, the denizens of hell are reborn in more fortunate realms of existence.

The next realm is that of the hungry ghosts. Living beings in this realm suffer chiefly from hunger and thirst, heat and cold. They are completely bereft of the things they desire. It is said that when the hungry ghosts see a mountain of rice or a river of fresh water and run toward it, they find that the mountain of rice is only a

heap of pebbles and the river only a ribbon of blue slate. Similarly, it is said that in the summer even the moon feels hot to them, while in the winter even the sun is cold.

The foremost cause of rebirth as a hungry ghost is avarice and miserliness born of attachment and greed. As with the denizens of hell, the living beings in this realm are not condemned to eternal existence in the form of hungry ghosts, because when their unwholesome karma is exhausted, they will be reborn in a more fortunate realm.

In the next realm, that of animals, living beings suffer from a variety of unhappy circumstances. They suffer from the fear and pain that results from constantly killing and eating one another. They suffer from the human beings who kill them for food or for their hides, pearls, or teeth. Even if they are not killed, many domestic animals are forced to work for people who drive them on with hooks and whips. All this is a source of suffering.

The principal cause of rebirth as an animal is ignorance. The blind, heedless pursuit of one's animal desires; preoccupation with eating, sleeping, and sexual gratification, accompanied by disregard for the need to develop one's mind and practice virtue—all these lead one to be reborn as an animal.

Now, when we say, for instance, that aversion is the cause of rebirth in the hells, that attachment is the cause of rebirth among hungry ghosts, and that ignorance is the cause of rebirth in the realm of animals, it does not mean that an isolated act motivated by aversion, attachment, or ignorance will result in rebirth in the corresponding class of living being. What it does mean is that there is a definite, proven relationship between aversion or hatred and rebirth in the hells, just as there is between attachment and greed and rebirth among the hungry ghosts, and between ignorance and rebirth among the animals. If unimpeded and unobstructed by countervailing virtuous actions, actions habitually motivated by these unwholesome

attitudes are likely to lead to rebirth in these three states of woe.

I am going to skip the realm of human beings for the moment in order to go on to the realm of the demigods. The demigods are physically more powerful and mentally more acute than human beings, yet they suffer because of jealousy and conflict. According to ancient Indian mythology, the demigods and gods share a celestial tree. While the gods enjoy the fruit of this tree, the demigods are custodians of its roots. Consequently, they are envious of the gods and constantly attempt to take the fruit from them. They fight the gods but are defeated and suffer greatly as a result. Because of this rampant jealousy and conflict, rebirth among the demigods is unhappy and unfortunate.

As in the case of the other realms, there is a cause of rebirth among the demigods. On the positive side, the cause is generosity, while on the negative side, the cause is jealousy and envy.

The realm of the gods is the happiest of the six realms. As a consequence of wholesome actions done in the past, observation of the codes of good conduct, and the practice of meditation, living beings are reborn among the gods, where they enjoy sensual pleasures, spiritual happiness, or supreme tranquillity, depending on the level of the realm in which they are born. Nonetheless, the realm of the gods is not to be desired because the happiness of the gods is impermanent. No matter how much they may enjoy their existence, when the force of their wholesome karma is exhausted, the effects of their good conduct and experience of meditation spent, the gods fall from heaven and are reborn in another realm. At that moment, it is said that the gods suffer even more mental anguish than the physical pain suffered by other living beings in the other realms.

The gods are reborn in the heavens as a consequence of their practice of good conduct and meditation, but there is also a negative factor associated with rebirth in

the heavens, and this is pride.

As you can see, we have an affliction or defilement associated with each of these five realms—hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, demigods, and gods—namely, aversion, attachment, ignorance, jealousy, and pride, respectively. Birth in any of these five realms is undesirable. The three lower realms are undesirable for obvious reasons—both because of the intense suffering in them and because of the total ignorance of the beings who inhabit these realms. Even rebirth in the realms of the demigods and gods is undesirable because, although one experiences a certain degree of happiness and power among them, existence there is impermanent. Besides, the distractions and pleasures in these realms keep the beings there from looking for a way out of the cycle of birth and death. This is why it is said that, of the six realms of existence, the most fortunate, opportune, and favored is the human realm. This is also why I have left our discussion of the human realm until last.

The human realm is the most favored of the six realms because, as a human being, one has the motivation and opportunity to practice the Dharma and achieve enlightenment. One has this motivation and opportunity because the conditions conducive to practicing the path are present. In the human realm, one experiences both happiness and suffering. The suffering in this realm, though terrible, is not as great as the suffering in the three realms of woe. The pleasure and happiness experienced in the human realm are not as great as the pleasure and intense happiness experienced by beings in the heavens, nor are humans overwhelmed by the unbearable suffering that beings in the hells undergo. And unlike animals, human beings possess sufficient intelligence to recognize the necessity of looking for a means to achieve the total end of suffering.

Human birth is difficult to gain from a number of points of view. First of all, it is difficult from the point of view of its cause. Good conduct is the foremost cause of

rebirth as a human being, but truly good conduct is exceedingly rare. Second, human birth is difficult to gain from the point of view of number, for human beings are only a small fraction of the living beings who inhabit the six realms. Third, it is not enough simply to be born as a human being, because there are countless humans who do not have the opportunity to practice the Dharma. It is therefore not only necessary to be born as a human but also to have the opportunity to practice the Dharma, developing one's qualities of morality, mental development, and wisdom.

The Buddha used a simile to illustrate the rarity and precious nature of opportune birth among human beings. Suppose the whole world were a vast ocean, and on the surface of this ocean a yoke floated, blown about by the wind. Suppose, further, that at the bottom of the ocean there lived a blind tortoise who came to the surface only once every hundred years. The Buddha said that it is as rare to attain opportune birth as a human as for that tortoise to place his neck through the yoke when rising to the surface. Elsewhere, it is said that to be born as a human being with the opportunity to practice the Dharma is as rare as it would be to throw a handful of dried peas against a stone wall and have one pea stick in a crack in it.

Thus it is foolish to waste human existence, not to mention the fortunate conditions that we enjoy in free societies such as the opportunity we have to practice the Dharma. It is extremely important that, having this opportunity, we make use of it. If we fail to practice the Dharma in this life, there is no way of knowing where in the six realms we will be reborn, or when we will have such a chance again. We must strive to free ourselves from the cycle of rebirth because failing to do so means that we continue to circle endlessly among these six realms of existence. When the karma, wholesome or unwholesome, that causes us to be born in any of the six realms is exhausted, rebirth occurs, and we find ourselves again in another realm.

It is said that all of us have circled in these six realms since beginningless time. It

is also said that if all the skeletons we have had in our various lives were heaped up, the pile would exceed the height of Mount Sumeru, that if all the mother's milk we have drunk in our countless existences were collected together, it would amount to more than all the water in all the oceans. Now that we have the opportunity to practice the Dharma, we must do so without delay.

In recent years, there has been a tendency to interpret the six realms in psychological terms. Some teachers have suggested that the experiences of the six realms are available to us in this very life. This is true as far as it goes. Men and women who find themselves in prisons, tortured, killed, and so forth are undoubtedly experiencing situations similar to those of the hell beings; those who are miserly and avaricious experience a state of mind similar to that of the hungry ghosts; those who are animal-like experience a state of mind similar to that of animals; those who are quarrelsome, power-hungry, and jealous experience a state of mind like that of the demigods; and those who are pure, tranquil, serene, and exalted experience a state of mind similar to that of the gods.

And yet, although the experiences of the six realms are to some extent available to us in this human existence, I think it would be a mistake to assume or believe that the other five realms of existence do not have a reality which is as real as our own human experience. The hell realms and the realms of the hungry ghosts, animals, demigods, and gods are as real as our human realm. You will recall that mind is the creator of all things. Actions done with a pure mind (motivated by generosity, love, and so forth) result in happiness, in states of existence like the human realm and the realm of the gods. But actions done with an impure mind (motivated by attachment, aversion, and the like) result in unhappy states like those of the hungry ghosts and hell beings.

Finally, I would like to distinguish rebirth from transmigration. You may not

know that, in Buddhism, we consistently speak of rebirth, not transmigration. This is because in Buddhism we do not believe in an abiding entity, or substance, that transmigrates. We do not believe in a self that is reborn. This is why, when we explain rebirth, we make use of examples that do not require the transmigration of an essence or a substance.

For example, when a sprout is born from a seed, there is no substance that transmigrates. The seed and the sprout are not identical. Similarly, when we light one candle from another candle, no substance travels from one to the other, even though the first is the cause of the second. When one billiard ball strikes another, there is a continuity; the energy and direction of the first ball is imparted to the second. The first ball is the cause of the second billiard ball moving in a particular direction and at a particular speed, but it is not the same ball. When we step twice into a river, it is not the same river, and yet there is continuity, the continuity of cause and effect.

Hence there is rebirth, but not transmigration. Moral responsibility exists, but not an independent, permanent self. The continuity of cause and effect exists, but not permanence. I want to end with this point because we will be considering the example of the seed and the sprout, and the example of the flame in an oil lamp, in Chapter 10, when we discuss interdependent origination. Thereafter, we will better understand how interdependent origination makes moral responsibility and not-self compatible.

Chapter Ten
Interdependent Origination

In this chapter, I take up a very important topic in Buddhist studies: the teaching of interdependent origination. I am aware of the fact that many people believe that interdependent origination is a very difficult subject, and I would not say that there is no truth in that belief. When Ananda once remarked that, despite its apparent difficulty, the teaching of interdependent origination is actually quite simple, the Buddha rebuked him, saying that in fact this teaching is very deep.

The teaching of interdependent origination is certainly one of the most important and profound teachings in Buddhism. Yet I sometimes feel that our fear of interdependent origination is to some extent unwarranted. To begin with, there is nothing particularly difficult about the term itself. After all, we all know what "interdependence" means, and what "birth," "origination," or "arising" means. Only when we begin to examine the function and contents of interdependent origination do we recognize the fact that it is a very profound and significant teaching.

Some indication of this can be gained from the Buddha's own statements. The Buddha very frequently expressed his experience of enlightenment in one of two ways: either in terms of having understood the Four Noble Truths, or in terms of having understood interdependent origination. Conversely, he often said that, in order to attain enlightenment, one has to understand the meaning of these truths.

On the basis of the Buddha's own statements, we can see a very close relation between the Four Noble Truths and interdependent origination. What is it that these

two formulas have in common? The principle they have in common is the principle of causality—the law of cause and effect, of action and consequence. In Chapters 4 and 7, I mentioned that the Four Noble Truths are divided into two groups—the first two (suffering and the cause of suffering) and the last two (the end of suffering and the path to the end of suffering). In both these groups, it is the law of cause and effect that governs the relationship. In other words, suffering is the effect of the cause of suffering, and the end of suffering is the effect of the path to the end of suffering.

Here, too, with interdependent origination, the fundamental principle at work is that of cause and effect. In interdependent origination, we have a more detailed description of what actually takes place in the causal process. Let us take a few examples that illustrate the nature of interdependent origination used by the Buddha himself. The Buddha said the flame in an oil lamp burns dependent on the oil and the wick: when the oil and wick are present, the flame burns, but if either is absent, the flame will cease to burn. Let us also take the example of the sprout: dependent on the seed, earth, water, air, and sunlight, the sprout arises.

There are innumerable examples of interdependent origination because there is no existing phenomenon that is not the effect of interdependent origination. All these phenomena arise dependent on a number of causal factors. Very simply, this is the principle of interdependent origination.

Of course, we are particularly interested in the principle of interdependent origination insofar as it concerns the problem of suffering and rebirth. We are interested in how interdependent origination explains the situation in which we find ourselves here and now. In this sense, it is important to remember that interdependent origination is essentially and primarily a teaching that has to do with the problem of suffering and how to free ourselves from suffering, and not a description of the evolution of the universe.

Let me briefly list the twelve components, or links, that make up interdependent origination: (1) ignorance, (2) volition, (3) consciousness, (4) name and form, (5) the six sense spheres, (6) contact, (7) feeling, (8) craving, (9) clinging, (10) becoming, (11) birth, and (12) old age and death.

There are two principal ways we can understand these twelve components. One way to understand them is sequentially, over the course of three lifetimes—the past life, the present life, and the future life. In this case, ignorance and volition belong to the past life. They represent the conditions responsible for the occurrence of this life. The eight components of consciousness, name and form, the six sense spheres, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, and becoming belong to this life. In brief, these eight components constitute the process of evolution within this lifetime. The last two components, birth and old age and death, belong to the future life.

With the help of this first scheme, we can see how the twelve components of interdependent origination are distributed over the three lifetimes—how the first two, ignorance and volition, result in the emergence of this life, with its psycho physical personality from the past, and how, in turn, the actions performed in this life result in rebirth in a future life. This is one popular and authoritative way of interpreting the twelve components of interdependent origination.

The other interpretation of the relations among the twelve components of interdependent origination is also authoritative and has the support of recognized Buddhist masters and saints. It might be called a cyclical interpretation because it does not distribute the twelve components over the course of three lifetimes. Rather, it divides the twelve components into three categories: (1) afflictions, (2) actions and (3) sufferings.

In this second scheme, the three components of ignorance, craving, and clinging are viewed as belonging to the group of afflictions; volition and becoming, to the

group of actions; and the remaining seven components—consciousness, name and form, the six sense spheres, contact, feeling, birth, and old age and death—to the group of sufferings. By means of this interpretation, we can see both how the teaching of the Four Noble Truths—and particularly the teaching of the second truth, that of the cause of suffering—is conjoined with the teaching of karma and rebirth, and how these two important teachings together explain, in a more complete way, the process of rebirth and the origination of suffering.

You may recall that, in the context of discussing the Four Noble Truths, we said that ignorance, attachment, and ill-will are the causes of suffering. Now, if we look here at the three components of interdependent origination that are included in the group of afflictions, we find ignorance, craving, and clinging. Here, too, ignorance is the most basic. It is because of ignorance that we crave pleasures of the senses, existence, and nonexistence. Similarly, it is because of ignorance that we cling to pleasures of the senses, to pleasant experiences, to ideas, and most significantly, to the idea of an independent, permanent self. Thus ignorance, craving, and clinging are the cause of actions.

The two components of interdependent origination that are included in the group of actions are volition and becoming. Volition refers to the impressions, or habits, that we have formed in our stream of conscious moments, or conscious continuum. These impressions are formed by repeated actions. We can illustrate this with an example from geology. We know that a river forms its course by a process of repeated erosion. As rain falls on a hillside, that rain gathers into a rivulet, which gradually creates a channel for itself and grows into a stream. Eventually, as the channel of the stream is deepened and widened by repeated flows of water, the stream becomes a river, with well-defined banks and a definite course.

In the same way, our actions become habitual. These habits become part of our

personality, and we take these habits with us from life to life in the form of what we call volition, mental formation, or "habit energy." Our actions in this life are conditioned by the habits we have formed over countless previous lifetimes.

To return to the analogy of the channel of a river and the water in it, we might say that mental formations are the channel of the river, while the actions that we perform in this life are the fresh water that flows through the eroded channel created by previous actions. The actions that we perform in this life are represented by the component known as becoming. Hence we have the habits that we have developed over the course of countless lives, combined with new actions performed in this life, and these two together result in rebirth and suffering.

To summarize, we have the afflictions, which may be described as impurities of the mind—namely, ignorance, craving, and clinging. These mental impurities result in actions—both actions done in previous lives, which result in the formation of habit energy, or volition, and actions done in the present life, which correspond to the component known as becoming and which are liable to conform to the patterns established in previous lives.

Together, these impurities of the mind and these actions result in rebirth. In other words, they result in consciousness, in name and form, in the six sense spheres, in contact between the six senses and the objects of the six senses, in feeling, which is born of that contact, in birth, and in old age and death. In this interpretation, the five components of interdependent origination included in the groups of afflictions and actions—ignorance, craving, clinging, volition, and becoming—are the causes of rebirth and suffering. The other seven components—consciousness, name and form, the six sense spheres, contact, feeling, birth, and old age and death—are the effects of the afflictions and actions.

Together, the afflictions and actions explain the origin of suffering and the

particular circumstances in which each of us finds him- or herself, the circumstances in which we are born. You may recall that, in Chapter 8, I referred to the fact that, whereas the afflictions are common to all living beings, karma differs from person to person. In other words, although the afflictions account for the fact that all of us are prisoners within samsara, our actions account for the fact that some are born as human beings, others as gods, and still others as animals. In this sense, the twelve components of interdependent origination present a picture of samsara with its causes and its effects.

There would be no point in painting this picture of samsara if we did not intend to use it to change our situation, to get out of the round of birth and death. Recognizing the circularity of samsara, the circularity of interdependent origination, is the beginning of liberation. How is this so? As long as afflictions and actions are present, rebirth and suffering will occur. When we see that ignorance, craving, clinging, and actions repeatedly lead to rebirth and suffering, we will recognize the need to break this vicious circle.

Let us take a practical example. Suppose you are looking for the home of an acquaintance you have never visited before. Suppose you have been driving about for half an hour and have failed to find the home of your friend, and suppose suddenly you recognize a landmark and it dawns on you that you passed it half an hour ago. At that moment it will also dawn on you that you have been going around in circles, and you will stop and look at your road map, or inquire the way from a passerby so as to stop going around in circles and reach your destination.

This is why the Buddha said that he who sees interdependent origination sees the Dharma, and he who sees the Dharma sees the Buddha. This is also why he said that understanding interdependent origination is the key to liberation. Once we see the functioning of interdependent origination, we can set about breaking its vicious

circle. We can do this by removing the impurities of the mind—ignorance, craving, and clinging. Once these impurities are eliminated, actions will not be performed and habit energy will not be produced. Once actions cease, rebirth and suffering will also cease.

I would like to spend a little time on another important meaning of interdependent origination—namely, interdependent origination as an expression of the Middle Way. In Chapters 3 and 4, we had occasion to refer to the Middle Way, but confined ourselves to only the most basic meaning of the term. We said that the Middle Way means avoiding the extreme of indulgence in pleasures of the senses and also the extreme of self-mortification. In that context, the Middle Way is synonymous with moderation.

In the context of interdependent origination, the Middle Way has another meaning, which is related to its basic meaning, but deeper. In this context, the Middle Way means avoiding the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. How is this so? The flame in an oil lamp exists dependent on the oil and the wick. When either of these is absent, the flame will be extinguished. Therefore, the flame is neither permanent nor independent. Similarly, this personality of ours depends on a combination of conditions: the afflictions and karma. It is neither permanent nor independent.

Recognizing the conditioned nature of our personalities, we avoid the extreme of eternalism, that is, of affirming the existence of an independent, permanent self. Alternatively, recognizing that this personality, this life, does not arise by accident or mere chance but is conditioned by corresponding causes, we avoid the extreme of nihilism, that is, of denying the relation between actions and their consequences.

Although nihilism is the primary cause of rebirth in states of woe and is to be rejected, eternalism, too, is not conducive to liberation. One who clings to the extreme of eternalism will perform wholesome actions and be reborn in states of

happiness, as a human being or even as a god, but he will never attain liberation. Through avoiding these two extremes—through understanding the Middle Way—we can achieve happiness in this life and in future lives by performing wholesome actions and avoiding unwholesome actions, and eventually achieve liberation as well.

The Buddha constructed his teachings with infinite care. Indeed, the way he taught is sometimes likened to the behavior of a tigress toward her young. When a tigress carries her young in her teeth, she is most careful to see that her grip is neither too tight nor too loose. If her grip is too tight, it will injure or kill her cub; if it is too loose, the cub will fall and will also be hurt. Similarly, the Buddha was careful to see that we avoid the extremes of eternalism and nihilism.

Because he saw that clinging to the extreme of eternalism would bind us in samsara, the Buddha was careful to teach us to avoid belief in an independent, permanent self; seeing that the possibility of freedom could be destroyed by the sharp teeth of belief in a self, he therefore asked us to avoid the extreme of eternalism. Understanding that clinging to the extreme of nihilism would lead to catastrophe and rebirth in the states of woe, the Buddha was also careful to teach the reality of the law of cause and effect, or moral responsibility; seeing that we would fall into the misery of the lower realms should we deny this law, he therefore taught us to avoid the extreme of nihilism. This dual objective is admirably achieved through the teaching of interdependent origination, which safeguards not only our understanding of the conditioned and impermanent nature of the personality, but also our understanding of the reality of the law of cause and effect.

In the context of interdependent origination, we have established the conditioned and impermanent nature of the personality, or self, by exposing its dependent nature. In the chapters that follow, we will arrive at the impermanence

and impersonality of the self through examining its composite nature and analyzing it into its constituent parts. By these means, we will elucidate the truth of not-self that opens the door to enlightenment.

Chapter Eleven
The Three Universal Characteristics

The subject of this chapter is the three universal characteristics of existence. This is an important part of the teaching of the Buddha. Like the Four Noble Truths, karma, interdependent origination, and the five aggregates, the teaching of the three characteristics is part of what we might call the doctrinal contents of wisdom. In other words, when we talk about the knowledge and understanding that are implied by wisdom, we have this teaching also in mind.

Before we examine the three characteristics one by one, let us try to come to an understanding of what they mean and in what way they are useful. First of all, what is a characteristic and what is not? A characteristic is something that is necessarily connected with something else. Because a characteristic is necessarily connected with something, it can tell us about the nature of that thing. Let us take an example. Heat, for instance, is a characteristic of fire but not of water. Heat is a characteristic of fire because it is always and invariably connected with fire, whereas whether or not water is hot depends on external factors—an electric stove, the heat of the sun, and so forth. But the heat of fire is natural to fire.

It is in this sense that the Buddha uses the term "characteristic" to refer to facts about the nature of existence that are always connected with existence or always found in existence. The characteristic "heat" is always connected with fire. We can understand something about the nature of fire from heat. We can understand that fire is hot and therefore potentially dangerous, that it can consume us and our

possessions if not controlled. Yet we can also use fire to cook our food, to warm ourselves, and so forth. Thus the characteristic of heat tells us something about fire, what fire is, and what to do with fire.

If we were to think of the characteristic of heat as connected with water, it would not help us understand the nature of water or use water intelligently because heat is not always connected with water. Water cannot necessarily burn us or consume our possessions, nor can we necessarily cook our food with water or warm ourselves with water. Hence when the Buddha said that there are three characteristics of existence, he meant that these characteristics are always present in existence, and that they help us understand what to do with existence.

The three characteristics of existence that we have in mind are (1) impermanence, (2) suffering and (3) not-self. These three characteristics are always present in or connected with existence, and they tell us about the nature of existence. They help us know what to do with existence. As a result of understanding the three characteristics, we learn to develop renunciation, or detachment. Once we understand that existence is universally characterized by impermanence, suffering, and not-self, we eliminate our attachment to existence. And once we eliminate our attachment to existence, we gain the threshold of nirvana.

This is the purpose of understanding the three characteristics: it removes attachment by removing delusion—the misunderstanding that existence is permanent, pleasant, and has something to do with the self. This is why understanding the three characteristics is part of the contents of wisdom.

Let us look at the first of the three characteristics of existence, the characteristic of impermanence. The fact of impermanence has been recognized not only in Buddhist thought but elsewhere in the history of ideas. It was the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus who remarked that one cannot step into the same river twice.

This observation, which implies the ever-changing and transient nature of things, is a very Buddhistic one. In the Buddhist scriptures, it is said that the world is impermanent like autumn clouds, that birth and death are like a dance, and that human life is like a flash of lightning or a waterfall. All these are compelling images of impermanence which help us understand that all things are marked or characterized by impermanence.

If we look at ourselves, we find that our bodies are impermanent and subject to constant change. We grow thin. We grow old and gray—our teeth and hair fall out. If you need any proof of the impermanence of the physical form, you need only look at the photograph on your driver's license or passport over the years. Similarly, our mental states are impermanent. At one moment we are happy, and at another moment sad. As infants, we hardly understand anything; as adults in the prime of life, we understand a great deal more; in old age, we lose the power of our mental faculties and become like infants.

This is true also of the things we see around us. Not one of the things we see around us will last forever—not the apartment buildings, the temples, the rivers and islands, the mountain chains, or the oceans. We know for a fact that all these natural phenomena—even those that appear to be the most durable, even the solar system itself—will one day decline and cease to exist.

This process of the constant change of things—personal and impersonal, internal and external—goes on constantly even without our noticing it, and affects us intimately in daily life. Our relations with other people are subject to the characteristic of impermanence and change. Friends become enemies; enemies become friends. Enemies even become relatives, while relatives become enemies. If we look closely at our lives, we can see how all our relationships with other people are marked by impermanence. Our possessions are also impermanent. All the things

that we dearly love—our homes, our automobiles, our clothes—are impermanent. All of them will decay and eventually be destroyed. In every aspect of our lives—whether it be mental or material, whether it be our relationships with others or our possessions— impermanence is a fact that is verified by direct, immediate observation.

Understanding impermanence is important not simply for our practice of the Dharma but also in our daily lives. How often do friendships deteriorate and end because one of the two persons involved fails to notice that his or her friend's attitudes and interests have changed? How often do marriages fail because one or both parties fail to take into account the fact that the other partner has changed?

It is because we lock ourselves into fixed, artificial, unchanging ideas of the characters and personalities of our friends and relatives that we fail to develop our relations with them appropriately and hence often fail to understand one another. Similarly, in our careers or public life, we cannot hope to succeed if we do not keep abreast of changing situations, such as new trends in our professions or disciplines. Whether in our personal lives or in our public ones, understanding impermanence is necessary if we are to be effective and creative in how we handle our personal and professional affairs.

Although understanding impermanence yields these immediate benefits here and now, it is particularly effective as an aid to our practice of the Dharma. The understanding of impermanence is an antidote to attachment and ill-will. It is also an encouragement to our practice of the Dharma. And, finally, it is a key to understanding the ultimate nature of things, the way things really are.

Remembering death, especially, is said to be like a friend and a teacher to one who wishes to practice the Dharma. Remembering death acts as a discouragement to excessive attachment and ill-will. How many quarrels, petty disagreements, lifelong

ambitions and enmities fade into insignificance before recognition of the inevitability of death? Throughout the centuries, Buddhist teachers have encouraged sincere practitioners of the Dharma to remember death, to remember the impermanence of this personality.

Some years ago, I had a friend who went to India to study meditation. He approached a very renowned and learned Buddhist teacher and asked him for some meditation instructions. The teacher was reluctant to teach him because he was not convinced of his sincerity. My friend persisted and asked him again and again. Finally, the teacher told him to come the following day. Full of anticipation, my friend went to see him as he had been instructed. The master said to him, "You will die; meditate on that."

Meditation on death is extremely beneficial. We all need to remember the certainty of our own deaths. From the moment of birth, we move inexorably toward death. Remembering this—and remembering that, at the time of death, wealth, family, and fame will be of no use to us—we must turn our minds to practice of the Dharma. We know that death is absolutely certain. There has never been a single living being who has escaped it. And yet, although death itself is certain, the time of death is uncertain. We can die at any moment. It is said that life is like a candle in the wind, or a bubble of water: at any moment it may be snuffed out, it may burst. Understanding that the time of death is uncertain, and that we now have the conditions and opportunity to practice the Dharma, we ought to practice it quickly, so as not to waste this opportunity and precious human life.

Finally, understanding impermanence is an aid to understanding the ultimate truth about the nature of things. Seeing that all things are perishable and change every moment, we also begin to see that things have no substantial existence of their own—that in our persons and in the things around us, there is nothing like a self,

nothing substantial. In this sense, impermanence is directly related to the last of the three characteristics, the characteristic of not-self. Understanding impermanence is a key to understanding not-self. We will talk more about this later, but for the moment let us go on to the second of the three characteristics, the characteristic of suffering.

The Buddha said that whatever is impermanent is suffering, and whatever is impermanent and suffering is also not-self. Whatever is impermanent is suffering because impermanence is an occasion for suffering. Impermanence is an occasion for suffering rather than a cause of suffering because impermanence is only an occasion for suffering as long as ignorance, craving, an clinging are present.

How is this so? In our ignorance of the real nature of things, we crave and cling to objects in the forlorn hope that they may be permanent, that they may yield permanent happiness. Failing to understand that youth, health, and life itself are impermanent, we crave them and cling to them. We long to hold onto our youth and prolong our life, yet because they are impermanent by nature, they slip through our fingers. When this occurs, impermanence is an occasion for suffering. Similarly, we fail to recognize the impermanent nature of possessions, power, and prestige, so we crave and cling to them. When they end, impermanence is an occasion for suffering.

The impermanence of all situations in samsara is a particular occasion for suffering when it occurs in the so-called fortunate realms. It is said that the suffering of the gods is even greater than the suffering of beings in the lower realms because the gods see that they are about to fall from the heavens into those lower realms of existence. Even the gods trembled when the Buddha reminded them of impermanence. Thus because even those pleasant experiences we crave and cling to are impermanent, impermanence is an occasion for suffering, and whatever is impermanent is suffering.

Now we come to the third universal characteristic of existence, the characteristic

of not-self, impersonality, or insubstantiality. This is one of the really distinct features of Buddhist thought and of the teaching of the Buddha. During the later development of religion and philosophy in India, Hindu schools became increasingly similar to the teaching of the Buddha in their techniques of meditation and in some of their philosophical ideas. Thus it became necessary for Buddhist masters to point out that there was still a distinctive feature that set Buddhism apart from the Hindu schools that so closely resembled it. That distinctive feature is the teaching of not-self.

Sometimes, this teaching of not-self is a cause of confusion because people wonder how one can deny the self. After all, we do say, "I am speaking" or "I am walking," "I am called so and so" or "I am the father (or the son) of such and such a person." How can we deny the reality of that "I"?

To clarify this, I think it is important to remember that the Buddhist rejection of the "I" is not a rejection of this convenient designation, the name or term "I." Rather, it is a rejection of the idea that this name or term "I" stands for a substantial, permanent, and changeless reality. When the Buddha said that the five factors of personal experience were not the self and that the self was not to be found within them, he meant that, on analysis, this name or term "I" does not correspond to any essence or entity.

The Buddha used the examples of a chariot and a forest to explain the relation between the name or term "I" and the components of personal experience. The Buddha explained that the term "chariot" is simply a convenient name for a collection of parts that are assembled in a particular way. The wheels are not the chariot, nor is the axle, nor is the carriage, and so forth. Similarly, a single tree is not a forest, nor are a number of trees. Yet there is no forest apart from individual trees, so the term "forest" is just a convenient name for a collection of trees.

This is the thrust of the Buddha's rejection of the self. His rejection is a rejection

of the belief in a real, independent, permanent entity that is represented by the name or term "I." Such a permanent entity would have to be independent, would have to be sovereign in the way a king is master of those around him. It would have to be permanent, immutable, and impervious to change, and such a permanent entity, such a self, is nowhere to be found.

The Buddha applied the following analysis to indicate that the self is nowhere to be found either in the body or the mind: (1) The body is not the self, for if the body were the self, the self would be impermanent, would be subject to change, decay, destruction, and death. Hence the body cannot be the self. (2) The self does not possess the body, in the sense that I possess a car or a television, because the self cannot control the body. The body falls ill, gets tired and old against our wishes. The body has an appearance which often does not agree with our wishes. Hence in no way does the self possess the body. (3) The self does not exist in the body. If we search our bodies from the tops of our heads to the tips of our toes, we can nowhere locate the self. The self is not in the bone or in the blood, in the marrow or in the hair or spittle. The self is nowhere to be found within the body. (4) The body does not exist in the self. For the body to exist in the self, the self would have to be found apart from the body and mind, but the self is nowhere to be found.

In the same way, (1) the mind is not the self because, like the body, The mind is subject to constant change and is agitated like a monkey. The mind is happy one moment and unhappy the next. Hence the mind is not the self because the mind is constantly changing. (2) The self does not possess the mind because the mind becomes excited or depressed against our wishes. Although we know that certain thoughts are wholesome and certain thoughts unwholesome, the mind pursues unwholesome thoughts and is indifferent toward wholesome thoughts. Hence the self does not possess the mind because the mind acts independently of the self. (3)

The self does not exist in the mind. No matter how carefully we search the contents of our minds, no matter how carefully we search our feelings, ideas, and inclinations, we can nowhere find the self in the mind and the mental states. (4) The mind does not exist in the self either because again the self would have to exist apart from the mind and body, but such a self is nowhere to be found.

There is a very simple exercise that any one of us can perform. If we all sit quietly for a brief period of time and look within our bodies and minds, without fail we find that we cannot locate a self anywhere within the body or the mind. The only conclusion possible is that "the self" is just a convenient name for a collection of factors. There is no self, no soul, no essence, no core of personal experience apart from the ever-changing, interdependent, impermanent physical and mental factors of personal experience, such as our feelings, ideas, habits, and attitudes.

Why should we care to reject the idea of a self? How can we benefit by rejecting the self? We can benefit in two important ways. First of all, we can benefit on a mundane level, in our everyday lives, in that we become more creative, more comfortable, more open people. As long as we cling to the self, we will always have to defend ourselves, our property, our prestige, opinions, and even our statements. But once we give up the belief in an independent and permanent self, we will be able to relate to other people and situations without paranoia. We will be able to act freely, spontaneously, and creatively. Understanding not-self is therefore an aid to living.

Second, and even more important, understanding not-self is a key to enlightenment. The belief in a self is synonymous with ignorance, and ignorance is the most basic of the three afflictions. Once we identify, imagine, or conceive of ourselves as an entity, we immediately create a schism, a separation between ourselves and the people and things around us. Once we have this conception of self,

we respond to the people and things around us with either attachment or aversion. In this sense, the self is the real villain of the piece.

Seeing that the self is the source and the cause of all suffering, and that rejection of the self is the cause of the end of suffering, why not do our best to reject and eliminate this idea of a self, rather than trying to defend, protect, and preserve it? Why not recognize that personal experience is like a banana tree or an onion—that when we take it apart piece by piece, examining it critically and analytically, we will find that it is empty of any essential, substantial core, that it is devoid of self?

When we understand—through study, consideration, and meditation—that all things are impermanent, are full of suffering, and are not-self, and when our understanding of these truths is no longer merely intellectual or academic but becomes part of our immediate experience, then the understanding of the three universal characteristics will free us of the fundamental errors that imprison us within the cycle of birth and death—the errors of seeing things as permanent, happy, and having to do with the self. When these delusions are removed, wisdom arises, just as, when darkness is removed, light arises. And when wisdom arises, we experience the peace and freedom of nirvana.

In this chapter we have confined ourselves to looking at personal experience in terms of body and mind. In the next chapter we will look more deeply into the Buddhist analysis of personal experience in terms of the elements of our physical and mental universe.

CHAPTER TWELVE
The Five Aggregates

In this chapter we will look at the teaching of the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness. In other words, we will look at the Buddhist analysis of personal experience, or the personality.

In the preceding chapters, I have several times had occasion to note that Buddhist teachings have been found relevant to modern life and thought in the fields of science, psychology, and so forth. This is also the case for the analysis of personal experience in terms of the five aggregates. Modern psychiatrists and psychologists have been particularly interested in this analysis. It has even been suggested that, in the analysis of personal experience in terms of the five aggregates, we have a psychological equivalent to the table of elements worked out in modern science—that is to say, a very careful inventory and evaluation of the elements of our experience.

What we are going to do now is basically an extension and refinement of our analysis at the end of Chapter 11. There, we spent some time on the teaching of not-self, exploring briefly the way the analysis of personal experience can be carried out along two lines: with regard to the body, and with regard to the mind. You will recall that we examined the body and mind to see whether we could locate the self, and saw that the self is not to be found in either of them. We concluded that the term "self" is just a convenient term for a collection of physical and mental factors, in the same way that "forest" is just a convenient term for a collection of trees. In this

chapter we will take our analysis still further. Rather than looking at personal experience simply in terms of body and mind, we will analyze it in terms of the five aggregates.

Let us first look at the aggregate of matter, or form. The aggregate of form corresponds to what we would call material, or physical, factors of experience. It includes not only our own bodies but also the material objects that surround us—the earth, the trees, the buildings, and the objects of everyday life. Specifically, the aggregate of form includes the five physical sense organs and the corresponding material objects of those sense organs: the eyes and visible objects, the ears and audible objects, the nose and olfactory objects, the tongue and objects of taste, and the skin and tangible objects.

But physical elements by themselves are not enough to produce experience. The simple contact between eyes and visible objects, or ears and audible objects, cannot result in experience. The eyes can be in conjunction with a visible object indefinitely without producing experience; the ears can be exposed to a sound indefinitely with the same result. Only when the eyes, a visible object, and consciousness come together is the experience of a visible object produced. Consciousness is therefore an indispensable element in the production of experience.

Before we go on to our consideration of the mental factors of personal experience, I would like to mention briefly the existence of one more set of an organ and its object, and here I speak of the sixth sense—the mind. This is in addition to the five physical sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin). Just as the five physical sense organs have their corresponding material objects, the mind has for its object ideas, or properties (*dharmas*). And as in the case of the five physical sense organs, consciousness must be present to unite the mind and its object so as to produce experience.

Let us now look at the mental factors of experience and see whether we can understand how consciousness turns the physical factors of existence into personal, conscious experience. First of all, we must remember that consciousness is mere awareness of, or mere sensitivity to, an object. When the physical factors of experience—for example, the eyes and a visible object—come into contact, and when consciousness, too, becomes associated with the material factors of experience, visual consciousness arises. This is mere awareness of a visible object, not anything like what we would normally call personal experience. Our everyday personal experience is produced through the functioning of the other three major mental factors of experience: the aggregate of feeling, the aggregate of perception, and the aggregate of volition, or mental formation. These three aggregates function to turn this mere awareness of the object into personal experience.

The aggregate of feeling, or sensation, is of three kinds—pleasant, unpleasant, and indifferent. When an object is experienced, that experience takes on one of these emotive tones, either the tone of pleasure, the tone of displeasure, or the tone of indifference.

Let us look next at the aggregate of perception. This is an aggregate that many people find difficult to understand. When we speak of perception, we have in mind the activity of recognition, or identification. In a sense, we are talking about attaching a name to an object of experience. The function of perception is to turn an indefinite experience into an identifiable, recognizable one. Here we are speaking of the formulation of a conception, or an idea, about a particular object. As with feeling, where we have an emotive element in the form of pleasure, displeasure, or indifference, with perception we have a conceptual element in the form of the introduction of a definite, determinate idea about the object of experience.

Finally, there is the aggregate of volition, or mental formation, which can be

described as a conditioned response to the object of experience. In this sense it partakes of the meaning of habit as well. We spent some time discussing volition in Chapter 10, when we considered the twelve components of interdependent origination. You will remember that we described volition as the impressions created by previous actions, the habit energy stored up over the course of countless former lifetimes. Here, as one of the five aggregates, volition plays a similar role. But volition has not only a static value but also a dynamic value because, just as our present actions are conditioned by past actions, so our responses here and now are motivated and directed in a particular way by volition. Volition therefore has a moral dimension, just as perception has a conceptual dimension and feeling has an emotive dimension.

You will notice that I have used the terms "volition" and "mental formation" together. This is because each of these terms represents one half of the meaning of the original term: mental formation represents the half that comes from the past, and volition represents the half that functions here and now. Mental formation and volition work together to determine our responses to the objects of experience, and these responses have moral consequences in the form of wholesome, unwholesome, and neutral effects.

We can now see how the physical and mental factors of experience work together to produce personal experience. To make this a little clearer, let us say that you decide to take a walk in the garden. As you walk, your eyes come into contact with a visible object. As your attention focuses on that object, your consciousness becomes aware of a visible object which is as yet indeterminate. Your aggregate of perception then identifies that visible object as, let us say, a snake. Once that happens, you respond to the object with the aggregate of feeling—the feeling of displeasure. Finally, you react to that visible object with the aggregate of volition,

with the intentional action of perhaps running away or picking up a stone.

In all our daily activities, we can see how the five aggregates work together to produce personal experience. At this very moment, for instance, there is contact between two elements of the aggregate of form—the letters on the page and your eyes. Your consciousness becomes aware of the letters on the page. Your aggregate of perception identifies the words that are written there. Your aggregate of feeling produces an emotional response—pleasure, displeasure, or indifference. Your aggregate of volition responds with a conditioned reaction—sitting at attention, daydreaming, or perhaps yawning. We can analyze all our personal experience in terms of the five aggregates.

There is one point, however, that must be remembered about the nature of the five aggregates, and that is that each of them is in constant change. The elements that constitute the aggregate of form are impermanent and are in a state of constant change. We discussed this in Chapter 11, when we noted that the body grows old, weak, and sick, and that the things around us are also impermanent and constantly changing. Our feelings, too, are constantly changing. Today we may respond to a particular situation with a feeling of pleasure; tomorrow, with displeasure. Today we may perceive an object in a particular way; later, under different circumstances, our perceptions will change. In semidarkness, we perceive a rope to be a snake; the moment the light of a torch falls on that object, we perceive it to be a rope.

Our perceptions, like our feelings and like the material objects of our experience, are ever-changing and impermanent; so, too, are our volitional responses. We can alter our habits. We can learn to be kind and compassionate. We can acquire the attitudes of renunciation, equanimity, and so forth. Consciousness, too, is impermanent and constantly changing. Consciousness arises dependent on an object and a sense organ. It cannot exist independently. As we have seen, all the physical

and mental factors of our experience—like our bodies, the physical objects around us, our minds, and our ideas—are impermanent and constantly changing. All these aggregates are constantly changing and impermanent. They are processes, not things. They are dynamic, not static.

What is the use of this analysis of personal experience in terms of the five aggregates? What is the use of this reduction of the apparent unity of personal experience into the elements of form, feeling, perception, volition or mental formation, and consciousness? The purpose is to create the wisdom of not-self. What we wish to achieve is a way of experiencing the world that is not constructed on and around the idea of a self. We want to see personal experience in terms of processes—in terms of impersonal functions rather than in terms of a self and what affects a self—because this will create an attitude of equanimity, which will help us overcome the emotional disturbances of hope and fear about the things of the world.

We hope for happiness, we fear pain. We hope for praise, we fear blame. We hope for gain, we fear loss. We hope for fame, we fear infamy. We live in a state of alternate hope and fear. We experience these hopes and fears because we understand happiness, pain, and so forth in terms of the self: we understand them as personal happiness and pain, personal praise and blame, and so on. But once we understand them in terms of impersonal processes, and once—through this understanding—we get rid of the idea of a self, we can overcome hope and fear. We can regard happiness and pain, praise and blame, and all the rest with equanimity, with even-mindedness. Only then will we no longer be subject to the imbalance of alternating between hope and fear.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
The Fundamentals in Practice

By way of conclusion, I would like to reflect on what we have discussed over the course of the preceding chapters and relate it to what we can do in our own personal lives, both now and in the future.

The teachings of the Buddha are exceedingly vast and very profound. Thus far, we have only managed to survey a few of the fundamental teachings of the Buddha, and these only superficially. You may feel that we have covered a lot, and that it is impossible to practice everything we have discussed. Indeed, it is said that it is difficult, even for a monk living in isolation, to practice all the fundamental teachings of the Buddha: small wonder that it may also be difficult for laymen and laywomen like ourselves, who have many secular responsibilities to fulfill. Nonetheless, if we succeed in sincerely cultivating and practicing even a few of the many teachings of the Buddha, we will have succeeded in making this life more meaningful. Moreover, we will be certain that we will again encounter circumstances favorable to the practice of the Dharma, and to the eventual realization of liberation.

Everyone can achieve the highest goal in Buddhism, be he or she a layperson or a member of the monastic order. All a person need do is make an honest effort to follow the Noble Eightfold Path. It is said that those who have realized the truth, like the Buddha Shakyamuni and his prominent disciples, did not do so accidentally. They did not fall from the sky like rain, nor spring up from the earth like grain. The Buddha and his disciples were once ordinary sentient beings like you and me. They

were once afflicted by impurities of the mind—attachment, aversion, and ignorance. It was through coming into contact with the Dharma, through purifying their words and deeds, through developing their minds, and through acquiring wisdom that they became free, exalted beings able to teach and help others realize the truth. There is therefore no doubt that, if we apply ourselves to the teachings of the Buddha, we, too, can attain the ultimate goal of Buddhism. We, too, can become like the Buddha and his prominent disciples.

It is of no use merely to listen to the Dharma or to read the Dharma, merely to write articles about the Dharma or give lectures about it, if we do not put it into practice. It has been said that those of us who call ourselves Buddhists can profit by occasionally taking stock. If we see that, over the preceding years or months, our practice of the Buddha's teachings has brought about a change in the quality of our experience—and it will probably be only a small change—then we know that the teachings are having some effect.

If all of us put the teachings of the Buddha into practice, there is no doubt that we will realize their benefits. If we seek to avoid harming others, if we try our best to help others whenever possible, if we learn to be mindful, if we learn to develop our ability to concentrate our minds, if we cultivate wisdom through study, careful consideration, and meditation, there is no doubt that the Dharma will benefit us. It will first lead us to happiness and prosperity in this life and in the next. Eventually, it will lead us to the ultimate goal of liberation, the supreme bliss of nirvana.

Part Two

The Mahayana

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
The Origins of the Mahayana Tradition

It must be said at the outset that, given the vastness of the Mahayana tradition, we cannot hope to do more than introduce its major trends in the space of a few short chapters. However, regardless of our personal inclinations toward or commitments to any one of the Buddhist traditions, we must recognize the fact that the Mahayana has contributed a great deal to Buddhist thought and culture. It has produced a vast literature, many works of art, and many different techniques for personal development. Many countries throughout Asia have been influenced by the Mahayana, and although it was neglected by modern scholars in comparison to the Theravada, there is now a tremendous interest in Mahayana literature and philosophy and in the path of the Bodhisattva. It is therefore appropriate that we should devote eight chapters to looking at the origins and development of the Mahayana tradition.

I have chosen to begin by considering the origins of the Mahayana because I believe that if we do not understand and appreciate the reasons why this tradition arose—its seeds, so to speak, in the primeval soil of the Buddhist tradition—it will be difficult for us to see the Mahayana from an objective perspective. I would like to look first at the very earliest period in the establishment of the Buddhist tradition, that is, at the life of the Buddha Shakyamuni himself.

The Buddha Shakyamuni taught for forty-five years at many places in north east central India. He is universally believed to have taught innumerable living beings.

They included not only human beings from all walks of life, but also animals and supra human beings such as the gods of the various heavens and the under world. The Buddha is also acknowledged by all the Buddhist traditions to have performed many extraordinary and inconceivable miracles of various kinds for the sake of Enlightening living beings. The Buddha was not a man nor a god as He himself avowed. But if he was not a god, he was certainly divine, exalted and supramundane, because he had made himself so over the course of countless existences. Indeed, all Buddhists believe that the Buddha is far greater than any god, his qualities and activities more beneficent and immense. The Buddha Shakyamuni set an example by his own career that people could emulate. The goal of this career was Enlightenment and Buddhahood and the way was the way of the Bodhisattva. The Buddha spoke of the goal of enlightenment and Buddhahood as well as of the goal of Nirvana. He himself had thoroughly taught the way of attaining the goal of Buddhahood by means of the practice of the perfections of the Bodhisattva in the many tales of his former existences.

The Buddha Shakyamuni allowed his followers to accept and adapt his teaching to their own abilities and aspirations. While never abandoning the cardinal virtues of morality and wisdom, the Buddha permitted a great deal of scope for individual expression. He encouraged free inquiry among the laity and democracy within the monastic community. This is evident in many places throughout his teachings. There is, for example, the famous doctrine he articulated in his advice to the Kalamas, when he said that one should not rely on secondary means of verifying assertions about the nature of things, but test such assertions in the light of one's own personal experience and only then accept them as true.

In a similar vein, he said that one should test the truth of assertions in the light of the criteria of observation, reasoning, and self-consistency, the way a wise man

tests the purity of gold by cutting, rubbing, and heating it. Again, toward the end of his career, the Buddha told his disciples to be lamps unto themselves, to light their own way with their own reasoning. His last words were, "Subject to change are all compounded things; work out your liberation with diligence."

The Buddha also encouraged self-reliance in his instructions to the community of monks regarding the code of monastic discipline. Consequently, he told Ananda that, after he himself had died, the members of the Order would be free to abolish the lesser rules of monastic discipline if they saw fit. Indeed, it is significant that the Buddha even refused to appoint a successor to head the Buddhist community after his death. All these facts point to the climate that existed in the very early Buddhist community—a climate of free inquiry, democracy, and independence.

After the Buddha's death, his teachings were preserved in an oral tradition that was handed down from one generation of followers to another, maintained in their collective memory. Literacy was a privilege of the elite in India at that time, and it is another indication of the premium placed on democracy within the Buddhist tradition that literary formulation of the teaching was neglected for so long. Many people were not literate, so word of mouth was the universal medium for preservation and dissemination of the Dharma. During the five hundred years when the teaching was preserved orally, a number of assemblies or councils were convened to organize, systematize, and determine the commonly accepted versions of the doctrinal teaching and the monastic discipline, or Vinaya. There were certainly three and maybe more than six of these assemblies convened during this period at various places throughout India. The result was the emergence of a great many schools whose doctrines and disciplinary rules varied to a greater or lesser degree.

The First Council was certainly held immediately after the Buddha died at Rajagriha the capital of Magadha. There it was asked whether the council should

proceed to abolish the lesser precepts, as the Buddha had told Ananda the Order might do if it saw fit. Unfortunately, Ananda had neglected to ask the Buddha which were the lesser precepts. This uncertainty led the presiding Elder, Maha Kashyapa to recommend that the assembly retain all the rules of discipline without any modifications. This fact is significant because it indicates that the question of disciplinary rules was debated at the time of the First Council. The question was to arise again at the Second Council and was the major issue there.

In addition, the records of the First Council tell us the story of a monk named Purana who arrived at Rajagriha just as the assembly was concluding its deliberations. He was invited by the organizers to participate in the closing phases of the council but declined, saying that he would prefer to remember the teaching of the Buddha as he had heard it from the Buddha himself. This fact is significant because it indicates that there were already people who preferred to preserve an independent tradition, to remember the Dharma they themselves had heard from the Buddha. Both episodes indicate the degree of freedom of thought that existed at the time of the early Buddhist community.

Let us now look at the record of the Second Council which was held about a hundred years later. At this council, the issue that dominated the debate, and that precipitated the calling of the council was disciplinary. A number of monks had taken up practices which the elder monks considered breaches of monastic discipline. There were ten such practices, including carrying salt in a hollowed horn, which was considered a breach of the rule forbidding the storage of food; seeking permission for an action after the action had already been done; and accepting gold and silver, which was considered a breach of the rule forbidding the accumulation of wealth. The erring monks were declared in violation of the orthodox code of discipline and censured accordingly. Again the conservative stand of Maha

Kashyapa was adopted by the Elders at the council, and indeed the rules of monastic discipline have remained virtually unchanged over the centuries notwithstanding many actual modifications in practice.

In spite of the apparently easy resolution of the disciplinary dispute, the years after the Second Council saw the emergence and proliferation of many separate schools such as the Maha Sanghikas who some regard as the progenitors of the Mahayana, Vatsiputriyas and others. Consequently, by the time of the Third Council, held during the reign of Emperor Ashoka, in the third century B. C. E., there were already at least eighteen schools, each with its own doctrines and disciplinary rules.

Two schools dominated the deliberations at the Third Council, an analytical school called the Vibhajyavadins, and a school of realistic pluralism known as the Sarvastivadins. The council decided in favor of the analytical school and it was the views of this school that were carried to Sri Lanka by Ashoka's missionaries, led by his son Mahendra. There it became known as the Theravada. The adherents of the Sarvastivada mostly migrated to Kashmir in the north west of India where the school became known for its popularization of the path of the perfections of the Bodhisattva.

At yet another council, held during the reign of King Kanishka in the first century C.E., two more important schools emerged—the Vaibhashikas and the Sautrantikas. These differed on the authenticity of the Abhidharma, the Vaibhashikas holding that the Abhidharma was taught by the Buddha, while the Sautrantikas held that it was not.

By this time, Mahayana accounts tell us, a number of assemblies had been convened in order to compile the scriptures of the Mahayana tradition which were already reputed to be vast in number. In the north and south west of India as well as

at Nalanda in Magadha, the Mahayana was studied and taught. Many of the important texts of the Mahayana were believed to have been related by Maitreya the future Buddha and other celestial Bodhisattvas or preserved among the serpent gods of the underworld until their discovery by Mahayana masters such as Nagarjuna.

The appearance of all these schools each having its own version of the teaching of the Buddha clearly illustrates the immense diversity that characterized the Buddhist tradition at the beginning of the common era. Although differing in many particulars regarding the question of the authenticity of texts and teachings, the Buddhist schools continued to acknowledge a common identity as Buddhists. The single exception to this rule being the Vatsiputriyas who because of their adherence to the notion of an essential personality were universally dubbed heretics by the other schools.

The formation of the extant written canons of the schools, both in India and in Sri Lanka, is now generally accepted by scholars to belong to a relatively late period. The Mahayana teachings, as well as those of the other schools, including the Theravada, began to appear in written form more than five hundred years after the time of the Buddha. We know with certainty that the Theravada canon—recorded in Pali, an early Indian vernacular language—was first compiled in the middle of the first century B.C.E. The earliest Mahayana sutras, such as the *Lotus Sutra* and the Sutra of the *Perfection of Wisdom* are usually dated no later than the first century C. E. Therefore, the written canons of the Theravada and Mahayana traditions date to roughly the same period.

After the death of the Buddha, the views of the elders among the monks dominated Buddhist religious life, but by the first century C. E., dissatisfaction with the ideal of the Arhat whose goal was the achievement of personal freedom had grown significantly among the monastic and lay communities. The followers of the

Buddha were presented with a choice between two different ideals of religious life—Arhatship and Buddhahood.

While the aspiring Arhat is interested in gaining freedom for him- or herself, the Bodhisattva or Buddha to be is committed to achieving Enlightenment for the sake of all living beings.

The essence of the Mahayana conception of religious life is compassion for all living beings. Indeed, it is in this context that we should understand the increasing popularity of the Mahayana. It is hardly surprising if many devoted Buddhists' chose to follow the example of the Buddha whose compassion and wisdom were infinite and not that of his prominent disciples, the elders and Arhats who for the most part seemed austere and remote. In short, the Mahayana, with its profound philosophy, its universal compassion and its abundant use of skillful means, rapidly began to attract an enthusiastic following not only in India, but in the newly Buddhist lands of central Asia.

I would like to conclude this chapter by spending a few moments on a brief comparison of a few ideas from the canon of the Theravada tradition and some of the salient features of the Mahayana that appear prominently in Mahayana texts like the *Lotus Sutra,* the *Perfection of Wisdom Discourses* and the *Lankavatara Sutra.* It is often forgotten that not only are there many virtually identical Discourses belonging to both canons, but also that there are traces in the Theravada canon of some of the characteristic themes of the Mahayana—such as the supramundane nature of the Buddha, and the doctrines of emptiness and the creative and luminous nature of mind.

For example, in the Theravada canon we find the Buddha repeatedly referring to himself not by name but as the Tathagata, one who is identical with suchness, or reality. Nonetheless, the Buddha is credited with the power to produce emanations

for the edification of living beings. These passages contained in the Theravada canon suggest the transcendental, supramundane, and inconceivable nature of the Buddha, an idea very important to the Mahayana. Again according to the Theravada cannon, the Buddha extolled emptiness in the highest terms, calling it profound and going beyond the world. He said that form, feeling and the like were illusory, mere bubbles. Phenomena are nothing in themselves. They are unreal deceptions. This is a theme taken up and elaborated in the Mahayana Perfection of Wisdom literature.

Again, according to the Theravada canon the Buddha said that ignorance and imagination are responsible for the appearance of the world. He referred to the parable of the Demigod Vepachitta who was bound or freed according to the nature of his thoughts to illustrate this point. The original nature of consciousness however shines like a jewel, intrinsically pure and undefiled. These ideas are developed in Mahayana sutras like the *Lankavatara Sutra.* They are the very foundation of the Mahayana view of the nature of the mind.

Thus the origins of the Mahayana tradition can be found in the very earliest phases of the Buddhist tradition and in the Buddha's own career. The five hundred years after the death of the Buddha witnessed the emergence of differing traditions of interpretation that, whatever their emphasis, all look back to the original, infinitely varied, and profound teaching of the Buddha. By the first century C.E., the formation of the Mahayana was virtually complete, and most of the major Mahayana sutras were in existence. We will discuss three of these sutras in the following chapters.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
The Lotus Sutra

The period between the Second Council and the first century B.C.E. saw the growth of Mahayana literature in India and the emergence of a number of important texts. The first to appear were transitional works like the *Lalitavistara* and *Mahavastu,* which belong to derivative schools of the Mahasanghikas and describe the career of the Buddha in exalted, supra mundane terms. These were followed by more than a hundred definitive Mahayana sutras, like the former, composed in Sanskrit and hybrid Sanskrit.

Most of these sutras are quite extensive; examples include the *Lotus Sutra,* the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* in eight thousand lines, the *Samadhiraja Sutra,* and the *Lankavatara Sutra*.. They make liberal use of parables and examples and put forward the major themes of the Mahayana tradition in a discursive, didactic way. These ideas were supported some time later by the systematic arguments found in the commentarial or exegetical literature, known as *shastras,* composed by outstanding figures like Nagarjuna, Asanga, and Vasubandhu.

Among the many Mahayana sutras now available to us, I will devote this and the next two chapters to three that exemplify important themes and phases in the development of Mahayana Buddhism: (1) the *Lotus Sutra* (*Saddharmapundarika Sutra*), (2) the *Heart Sutra* (*Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra*), and (3) the *Lankavatara Sutra.*

In many ways, the *Lotus* is the foundation sutra of the Mahayana tradition. It

has great influence in the Mahayana Buddhist world, not only in India but also in China and Japan, where it is the favorite text of the T'ien-t'ai and Nichiren schools. Moreover, insofar as it expounds the way of great compassion, the *Lotus Sutra* represents the essence of the Mahayana tradition's fundamental orientation, which is great compassion.

Let us examine a number of themes in the *Lotus Sutra* that I feel are particularly important for an understanding of the Mahayana tradition. Let us look first at what the sutra has to say about the Buddha. In Chapter 14, I mentioned a number of suggestions found in the Theravada canon that point to the supramundane and transcendental nature of the Buddha. This theme is elaborated on in formative, transitional texts like the *Mahavastu* and *Lalitavistara*. In the *Lotus Sutra*, the supramundane, eternal, and ever-active nature of the Buddha is explained very clearly and in considerable detail. The message is that the form of the Buddha Shakyamuni perceived by people in the sixth century B.C.E. was simply an apparition of the transcendental Buddha projected for the purpose of enlightening sentient beings. Although the world perceived the birth of Siddhartha among the Shakya clan, the event of his great renunciation, the years of his struggle for enlightenment, his attainment of enlightenment under the *bodhi* tree, his forty-five years of teaching, and his passing away into extinction at the age of eighty, all this was in fact merely a show for the purpose of enlightening sentient beings.

The case for this idea is advanced in the *Lotus Sutra* with the help of the parable of the physician that appears in chapter sixteen of the text. In this parable, a well-qualified and famous physician who has been away from home for a long time returns to find that his sons have taken poison and are seriously ill. He sets about preparing an excellent remedy for them according to his knowledge of medicine. Some of his sons immediately take the medicine he offers and are cured of their

illness.

Other sons, however, although they have looked forward to their father's return and assistance, are now unwilling to take the medicine he offers because they are already too deeply affected by the poison. They fail to appreciate the excellent properties of the medicine and continue in their grave illness. Seeing this, their father devises a way to induce them to be cured: he tells them that he is already advanced in years, that the time of his death is near, and that he must again travel to another country. He then leaves and has a message sent back to his sons telling them that he has died. Moved by the news of their father's death—and desperate now that there will be no one to look after them and cure them—they take the medicine and are cured. Hearing of their recovery, the father returns and is happily reunited with his sons.

Through this parable, we are given to understand that the Buddha's appearance in the world is like the return of the physician who has journeyed to a neighboring country. Upon his return, he finds that his sons, the people of the world, have ingested the poison of greed, anger, and delusion and are distressed, ill, and suffering. He devises a cure for their suffering, which is the Dharma, the path to liberation. Although some of the people of the world follow the path and achieve liberation, there are others who are too deeply afflicted by the poison of greed, anger, and delusion and who therefore refuse to follow the path which is good in the beginning, middle, and end. As a result, a device has to be employed to induce and encourage them to take the medicine, follow the path, and achieve liberation. That device is the apparent extinction of the Buddha—his entry into final nirvana. According to this parable, therefore, the historical Buddha never really lived and never really died, but was simply one of the many appearances of the

supramundane, transcendental Buddha.

The sutra reinforces this point in chapter eleven, through the appearance of an earlier Buddha, the Buddha Prabhutaratna, who had become a *Tathagata*, or enlightened one, eons before. While Shakyamuni is engaged in preaching the *Lotus Sutra* (as described in that sutra itself), Prabhutaratna appears to the assembled multitude, who see him within a jeweled stupa, his body perfectly formed. This is another indication not only that the Buddha Shakyamuni has not yet entered into final extinction, but also that the Buddhas who preceded him did not do so.

According to the *Lotus Sutra*, then, Buddhas possess a supramundane and transcendental, indefinite nature; they also respond and cater to the needs of sentient beings according to their individual abilities. In chapter five of the sutra, the Buddha uses the similes of rain and of light to illustrate this point. He says that, just as rain falls on all vegetation—trees, shrubs, medicinal herbs, and grasses—without discrimination, and each according to its nature and capacity takes nourishment from the rain, so the Buddhas, through their appearance in the world and their teachings, nourish all sentient beings, each according to his or her individual ability—whether great, like the tall trees; middling, like smaller trees and shrubs; or low, like the grasses. Just as each plant benefits from rain according to its capacity, so every sentient being benefits from the appearance of the Buddha according to his or her capacity. And just as the light of the sun and moon falls equally on hills, valleys, and plains, illuminating each according to its position and in its own way and time, so the Buddha's presence sheds light on all sentient beings—be they high, middling, or low—according to their individual positions and capacities. It is in this sense that the infinite, supramundane Buddha appears in countless forms to benefit sentient beings: in the form of an Arhat, a Bodhisattva, a friend of virtue, and even in the

form of an ordinary, unenlightened sentient being.

We know that it is difficult to know the ultimate nature of reality, the truth: the way things really are is not amenable to words. This is why the Buddha remained silent when he was asked whether the world is infinite or finite, both or neither, and whether the Tathagata exists or does not exist after death, or both or neither. The ultimate nature of reality has to be realized by oneself. This is reflected in the distinction between the Dharma that one becomes acquainted with indirectly, through the help of others, and the Dharma that one realizes for oneself. But this realization of the truth does not come easily. It has to be achieved by oneself, and it has to be the result of a direct, inner realization. Thus, motivated by great compassion, the Buddhas appear in the world to teach and help sentient beings achieve this realization of the ultimate nature of reality by stages. They do this through skillful means, according to the capacities and inclinations of sentient beings.

This idea regarding the differing capacities and inclinations of sentient beings is not peculiar to the Mahayana tradition. In the Theravada canon, also, the Buddha likens the varying capacities of living beings to the different positions of lotuses in a pond—some are submerged, others are partly submerged, and still others are free of the water and blossoming in the clear air and sunlight. Similarly, living beings are of inferior, middling, and superior capacity. The Theravada tradition also includes the idea of the Buddha's skillful means, as exemplified in different ways of teaching, such as directly and indirectly. This idea is reflected, too, in the distinction between the conventional and the ultimate truth. This notion of skillful means is developed and refined in the Mahayana tradition and is an extremely important theme of the *Lotus Sutra*.

Because the ultimate nature of reality is difficult to realize, and because sentient

beings differ in their capacities and inclinations, the Buddhas resorted to skillful means to lead each and every sentient being to the ultimate goal of enlightenment, according to his or her own way and inclination. Therefore, the *Lotus Sutra* explains that the vehicle of the Bodhisattvas, the vehicle of the Pratyekabuddhas (or "private Buddhas"), and the vehicle of the disciples are nothing more than skillful means calculated to suit the differing capacities and inclinations of sentient beings.

Chapter three of the *Lotus Sutra* uses a compelling parable to explain the nature of skillful means. The story it tells is this: Suppose there is a rich man who inhabits an old house and who has a number of children. One day the house suddenly catches on fire. The father, seeing that it will soon be engulfed in flames, calls to his children to come out, but they are absorbed in their play and do not heed his words. Being familiar with the inclinations of his children, the father thinks of a skillful device to induce them to leave the house. Knowing they are fond of toys, he calls to them to come out at once because he has brought them all different kinds of toy carts. The children abandon their play and rush out to get the carts. Once they are safely away from the burning house, the father gives each and everyone of them only the most excellent cart, the vehicle of the Buddhas.

It is easy to see that in this parable the house is the world, the fire is the fire of the afflictions, the father is the Buddha, and the children are the people of the world. The toy carts are the vehicles of the Bodhisattvas, Pratyekabuddhas, and disciples.

Elsewhere in the *Lotus Sutra,* the Buddha explains that he taught the Hinayana path for those who believe in the existence of the world, and the Mahayana for those whose merit is well matured. To have taught only the Hinayana would have been miserly, yet had he taught only the Mahayana, many would have despaired of achieving the goal of enlightenment and not entered the path at all. Thus the Hinayana and Mahayana are expedient devices for the people of the world, designed

to suit their different capacities and inclinations.

The Buddha also says in the sutra that Arhats like Shariputra and Rahula will all eventually attain Buddhahood. He then likens the nirvana of the Arhats to an illusory city conjured up by a wise guide who is leading a party of travelers to a vast treasure. On the way, the travelers grow weary and tired. They despair of reaching their goal, so the guide conjures up the appearance of a city that has all the amenities needed for them to rest and recover their strength. Thereafter, they will be able to continue their journey until they eventually reach the treasure. In this parable the guide is the Buddha, the travelers are the people of the world, and the illusory city is the nirvana of the Arhats.

The message of skillful means is further explained in the *Lotus Sutra* by other parables and similes. For example, in chapter four there is the parable of a son who has been parted from his father at a young age and who spends the better part of his life in poverty and suffering, ignorant of his origins. His father, longing to see his son again and hand down his vast inheritance to him, is grieved by his inability to locate him. One day, the son happens to come to his father's house. Seeing the splendor of the household and the respect the servants have for the master of the house, he becomes conscious of his inferiority and attempts to flee, but his father recognizes him and sends men to bring him back. Unable to recognize his father in return, the son is terrified and protests his innocence. Seeing the situation, the father tells his men to let him go.

Some time later, the father sends his men, dressed in poor apparel, to offer his son the work of sweeping out dung in the cow sheds of the household. His son accepts this menial task and works for some time. Gradually, the father increases his wages. All the while, the son is unaware that the master is in fact his own father, and the father refrains from revealing it so as not to upset or frighten him. Eventually the

son is elevated to the position of foreman. Only when he has thus broadened his vision and aspirations does his father reveal to him his origins and hand over to him his inheritance. At that point the son realizes his nobility and is overjoyed by his achievement.

In the same way, the *Lotus Sutra* says that we are all sons of the Buddha and will all achieve the inheritance of Buddhahood. But because our ambitions and aspirations are paltry, the Buddha has set us disciplines whereby we will gradually develop and expand our vision until we realize our true nature and kinship and are ready to accept this inheritance of Buddhahood.

The central theme of the *Lotus Sutra* is the working of skillful means out of great compassion. Out of great compassion, the Buddhas appear in the world. Out of great compassion, they exercise their skillful means in countless ways, through countless forms, devices, practices, and vehicles. All these are calculated to suit the varying capacities and inclinations of sentient beings so that each one can, in his or her own way and time, aspire to and achieve full and perfect enlightenment, the enlightenment of the Buddha. It is because of this message—with its universality, optimism, and encouragement for all—that the Mahayana tradition has been able to win such phenomenal popularity not only in India but also in Central and East Asia.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
The Heart Sutra

In this chapter we will discuss a very important class of Mahayana literature that concerns the perfection of wisdom (*prajnaparamita*). But before we look at the texts themselves, it may be useful to examine the meaning of the term *prajnaparamita* and the history of the Perfection of Wisdom discourses. The term *prajna,* which is often translated "wisdom" or "insight," is composed of the prefix *pra* and the root *jna* which means knowledge. *Pra* added to the root *jna* gives the sense of spontaneity, penetration, transcendentality. One might therefore better translate *prajna* as "penetrative or special knowledge or wisdom." The term *paramita* is most often translated "perfection"; other popular translations include "gone beyond," "transcendental," and even "the climax of" wisdom. We will understand the term better if we notice its similarity to the English words "parameter" and "meter," both of which concern measurement or limit. In *paramita,* therefore, we have a word that indicates "going beyond the limit."

Thus the whole term *prajnaparamita* ought to be understood to mean "penetrative wisdom or insight gone beyond the limit." If we remember this, we will avoid the danger of thinking of the perfection of wisdom as something static or fixed. This inevitably happens because the word "perfection" conjures up images of an unchanging, perfected condition. Yet in the perfection of wisdom we have a dynamic idea—the idea of a penetrative wisdom or insight that transcends the limit, that is transcendental. The perfection of wisdom is one of the Six Perfections of the

Mahayana tradition. It is also the name of a large number of Mahayana sutras that are collectively called the Perfection of Wisdom literature or Prajnaparamita sutras.

This class of texts includes discourses such as the *Diamond Sutra* (*Vajrachchhedika*) as well as the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines* (*Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra*), the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in Twenty-five Thousand Lines* (*Panchavimsatisahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra*), and the *Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* (*Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra*), which runs to a little over one page. It is generally agreed that each of these is either an expansion or an abridgment of a fundamental text of the Perfection of Wisdom discourses, presented in different versions and lengths to suit the tastes of different readers.

It is generally accepted by modern scholars that the Perfection of Wisdom discourses date to the beginning of the common era, and that they were among the first Buddhist texts translated into Chinese in the second century C.E. On the basis of this and additional evidence from India, we can confidently say that the Perfection of Wisdom literature is among the oldest available to us from any of the Buddhist traditions.

The particular example we will discuss here is the *Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra,* or the *Heart Sutra* for short, which is an excellent example of the essence of the Perfection of Wisdom teachings. There are three prominent figures who participate in the conversation in this sutra—the Buddha, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, and the disciple Shariputra. The presence of Shariputra is another indication of the continuity in the Buddhist tradition because, just as Shariputra figures prominently in the Abhidharma, so he is a major figure in the Perfection of Wisdom sutras.

Another important fact is that, although the dialogue between Shariputra and Avalokiteshvara is said to take place through the power of the Buddha, the Buddha

is said at the very outset to be seated all the time in deep absorption It is only at the end of the dialogue that the Buddha manifestly enters the conversation to commend Avalokiteshvara on his exposition. This is another indication of the inconceivable, extraordinary power of the Buddha—a reflection of the Mahayana vision of the transcendent nature of the Buddha that we considered in our discussion of the *Lotus Sutra* in Chapter 15.

The *Heart Sutra,* like the other Perfection of Wisdom discourses, sets out to accomplish one important task: to expound and encourage the transformation of wisdom into the perfection of wisdom. It sets out to complement analytical wisdom (which belongs to wisdom per se) with relational wisdom (which belongs to the perfection of wisdom). The analytical and relational methods are used in the Abhidharma literature, in the first and seventh books of the *Abhidharma Pitaka,* respectively. We might illustrate the nature of these two methods by means of an analogy: Through the analytical method, a chariot is seen not to be a unitary and homogenous whole but, rather, to be composed of individual parts. This comprehension of the composite nature of the chariot is the result of analytical wisdom. Through the relational method, however, even the individual parts of the chariot are seen not to exist ultimately. In the light of the perfection of wisdom, they are now seen to be dependent, conditioned, relative.

The passage from wisdom to the perfection of wisdom is thus the passage from a vision of reality characterized by perception and acceptance of individual components of reality to a vision characterized by perception of the emptiness, or voidness (*shunyata*), even of these individual components. This point is made very clearly in the *Heart Sutra* with reference to the five aggregates and eighteen elements, which are the result of the analytical method of the Buddhist investigation of reality.

In the *Heart Sutra,* the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara says that form, feeling,

perception, volition, and consciousness are, in their own being, void—that is, that the nature of the aggregates is empty of independent existence. And just as the five aggregates are empty, so are the eighteen elements that comprise personal experience.

Analysis reveals that three elements are involved in each of the six avenues of personal experience (the five senses plus the mind). For example, the activity of seeing can be analyzed into (1) the element of form, which is the visible object; (2) the element of the eye, which is the sense faculty of vision; and (3) the element of visual consciousness, which is the mental element. Similarly, in each of the activities of hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking, there is (1) an external or objective element, (2) an internal, subjective sense faculty, and (3) the consciousness that arises in conjunction with the external object and the sense faculty. Hence there are three components for each of the six activities, for a total of eighteen elements that result from the analytical investigation of personal experience. According to Avalokiteshvara, these eighteen elements do not exist in reality; like the five aggregates, they are empty of existence, or void.

Emptiness is not, however, a metaphysical entity. According to the teaching of the Perfection of Wisdom and Mahayana masters, emptiness is synonymous with both interdependent origination and the Middle Way. It is synonymous with interdependent origination because all that exists is conditioned and, relative to other factors, empty of independent existence. Emptiness is synonymous with the Middle Way because understanding emptiness enables one to transcend the alternatives or dualities of existence and nonexistence, identity and difference, and so forth.

Emptiness is not a view. This is illustrated at considerable length in the works of Nagarjuna, the founder of the Middle Way school, which championed emptiness. Emptiness is itself relative and devoid of independent existence. This is why

Haribhadra, in his commentary on the *Abhisamayalankara*, a text that elaborates on the message of the Perfection of Wisdom literature, lists among the various types of emptiness "the emptiness of emptiness": emptiness, too, is relative and empty.

Emptiness is, in fact, a therapeutic device. It is a corrective for the exclusively analytical view, which leaves us with a residual belief in the real existence of the elements of experience. Emptiness is a device that enables us to transcend this pluralistic belief in the independent existence of things. It is for this reason that emptiness is likened to a medicine that cures residual belief in the independent existence of elements. Emptiness is also likened to salt, which makes food palatable.

Like medicine and salt, emptiness taken in excess, or at the wrong time or place, can be dangerous and unpalatable. This is why one ought not abide in or cling to emptiness. Like a medicine, emptiness is designed to cure the illness of perceiving the independent existence of things. Once this illness has been overcome, one should discontinue the treatment, not persist in taking the medicine. Similarly, emptiness is the salt that renders experience palatable, and just as salt by itself is unpalatable, so emptiness by itself is an unpalatable diet.

It is because emptiness reveals and expresses the relativity of all phenomena that it becomes the key to understanding nonduality. We can see how recognition of the relativity—and subsequent transcendence—of opposites is tantamount to the perception of nonduality, or non-differentiation.

At this point we come to the central Mahayana doctrine of the nonduality, or non-differentiation, of samsara and nirvana. This is indicated in the *Heart Sutra* when Avalokiteshvara says that form is not different from emptiness and emptiness is not different from form. The other aggregates, too, are not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from the aggregates. Thus samsara and nirvana, the aggregates and emptiness, phenomena and the unconditioned, the

conditioned and the transcendental are all alternatives that are relative to each other: they have no independent existence. Indeed, because they are relative to each other, they are, each of them, ultimately unreal and empty. Hence the duality of samsara and nirvana is dissolved in the vision of emptiness. Emptiness is the way out of all extremes, even the extremes of samsara and nirvana.

Indeed, just as the distinction between samsara and nirvana is relative—being a subjective distinction that belongs to our way of perceiving and not to samsara and nirvana in themselves—so, in emptiness, there is an absence of other alternatives, an absence of the characteristics of origination and cessation, which are relative to each other and unreal. Unreal, too, according to the *Heart Sutra*, are ignorance, old age, and death; the destruction of ignorance, old age, and death; the Four Noble Truths; attainment and non-attainment. Like the roof beams of a house, none of these concepts, which depend one upon the other, exists independently.

The *Heart Sutra* says that, by relying on this perfection of wisdom whose object is emptiness, all the Tathagatas of the past have achieved the ultimate, supreme, and perfect enlightenment. It is for this reason that the perfection of wisdom, through which emptiness is known, has been called "the mother of the Tathagatas"—in other words, that from which the Tathagatas come.

The perfection of wisdom has also been likened to a sighted guide leading an assembly of blind men to their goal. The other perfections (of generosity, morality, patience, energy, and concentration) are themselves blind. They are unable to find the way to the goal of Buddhahood. But with the help of the eyes of the perfection of wisdom, they can arrive at that goal.

Again, the perfection of wisdom has been compared to baking an earthenware jar which, in the process, becomes resistant to shattering: so, too, when a Bodhisattva is trained and steeped in the perfection of wisdom, he becomes durable, stable, and

difficult to shatter.

The drive toward condensing the teaching of the larger *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* into the pith instruction of the *Heart Sutra* is further reflected in the emergence of the verbal formulas and mantras we find in the Mahayana tradition. Many of these are condensations of elaborate ideas that serve as aids to memory as well as to meditation. In the *Heart Sutra* we find the mantra of the perfection of wisdom, which, the sutra says, makes the unequal equal. We can see why this should be so if we recall that, in emptiness, all opposites, all alternatives, all extremes, and all characteristics do not exist. The perfection of wisdom mantra is also said to pacify all suffering. This, too, is clear from understanding that, in emptiness, neither beings nor sufferings exist.

We can see the essence of the perfection of wisdom expressed in the few lines of the mantra, *Tadyatha, Om, gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi, svaha* ("Thus, Om, gone, gone, gone beyond, gone well beyond, enlightenment, hail"). This is the transcendence of all alternatives, all views, all dualities that marks the entry into enlightenment through going beyond all limitations, dualities, and dogmas.

Arising from his deep absorption in meditation during the dialogue between Avalokiteshvara and Shariputra in the *Heart Sutra*, the Buddha commends Avalokiteshvara on his exposition of the perfection of wisdom, an exposition that reflects the ultimate, not the conventional standpoint. Briefly, the ultimate standpoint is the standpoint according to which beings, objects, and karma have no place, whereas the conventional standpoint conforms to the usages familiar in the world, in which beings, objects, and karma are treated as if they exist in reality. The Perfection of Wisdom sutras reflect the ultimate standpoint, born of the experience of nirvana. Even according to the Theravada canon, the Buddha said of this state that neither earth nor water, fire nor air, origination nor cessation exists in it, and that it is not

describable in terms of existence, nonexistence, both, or neither.

The Perfection of Wisdom literature suggests that we can all see symbols of emptiness in our own experience—stars, faults of vision, lamps, magical illusions, dewdrops, bubbles, dreams, lightning, clouds, and the like. Such phenomena are the visible expressions or manifestations of emptiness. In the conditioned, dependent, and insubstantial nature of these phenomena, we find intimations of the emptiness that is revealed in the perfection of wisdom.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
The Lankavatara Sutra

The *Lankavatara Sutra* is representative of a large body of literature and is particularly important for an understanding of the Mahayana tradition. Like the *Lotus Sutra* and the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, the *Lankavatara* is a voluminous work. It is complex in terms of both ideas and literary composition. Scholars have tended to date the written work to as late as the fourth century of the common era. Although this may be acceptable as far as the literary production of the text is concerned, a survey of the sutra reveals a number of germinal ideas that were systematized and elaborated on by Mahayana masters like Asanga and Vasubandhu. If we remember that both these masters lived in the fourth century C.E., we will have to place the formulation of the doctrines contained in the *Lankavatara* well before that time.

This is in line with what I have said before about the origin and authenticity of Mahayana literature in general. After all, we have seen that many of the germinal ideas of the Mahayana tradition are found even in the Theravada canon (see Chapter 14). The *Lankavatara* is representative of the canonical literature that is the foundation of the Mahayana school variously known as the Yogachara (school affirming the unity of meditation and action), the Vijnanavada (school affirming consciousness), and the Chittamatra (school affirming Mind Only). Just as the Perfection of Wisdom literature in general forms the canonical foundation of the Middle Way, or Madhyamaka, school, so the *Lankavatara Sutra* and a number of

other discourses form the canonical foundation of the Yogachara or Vijnanavada school, though obviously elements of one school can be found in the doctrine of the other, and vice versa.

The doctrine for which the *Lankavatara* is famous is the doctrine of the primacy of consciousness. This is sometimes called the doctrine of Mind Only, or of the sole reality of consciousness. The sutra states in unequivocal terms that the three worlds, or spheres—the sphere of sense desire, the sphere of form, and the formless sphere—are just mind itself. In other words, all the manifold objects of the world, the names and forms of experience, are merely manifestations of the mind. The *Lankavatara* says that our inability to free ourselves from the discrimination between the conceptions of subject and object is the cause of our rebirth in the cycle of birth and death. As long as we are unable to free ourselves from discrimination, we continue to be reborn in samsara. It is therefore the ability to free ourselves from the dualistic conceptions of subject and object that is the key to enlightenment.

But what is this "Mind Only" of which the *Lankavatara Sutra* speaks? Is it the empirical mind, the mind that participates in the activities of the six consciousnesses? It is clearly not this mind. The mind of which the sutra speaks both transcends and annihilates the conceptions of the dualities of existence and nonexistence, identity and difference, permanence and impermanence. It transcends the concepts of self, substance, and karma. It even transcends the concept of causation. According to the sutra, all these concepts are the products of false imagination, or discriminating thought (*vikalpa*). The mind of which the sutra speaks does not participate in these dualistic conceptions. From this it is clear that the mind of which the *Lankavatara* speaks is precisely that emptiness (*shunyata*) of which the Perfection of Wisdom literature speaks.

If the mind of which the *Lankavatara* speaks transcends the conceptions of the

dualities of existence and nonexistence, identity and difference, and so forth, then how is it that this nondual reality of mind manifests itself in the manifold objects of the world? The *Lankavatara*—and, indeed, the Mind Only school—expounds a system of eight types of consciousness. These eight include the six with which we are familiar from the Buddhist tradition at large (i.e., the five consciousnesses that arise in conjunction with the five physical sense faculties, and the sixth consciousness, which arises in conjunction with the faculty of the mind). The two additional types are the storehouse consciousness (*alayavijnana*) and the afflicted mind (*klishtamanas*). These eight consciousnesses form the basis of Yogachara or Vijnanavada philosophy.

The sutra uses an analogy to describe the process of schism that takes us from the ultimate, nondual condition of mind to the fragmented condition, characterized by the six empirical consciousnesses, that we experience in daily life. The analogy is that of the ocean, wind, and waves. In its depths the ocean is tranquil, just as, in its depths, the storehouse consciousness is. Moved by the wind, the surface of the ocean is stirred into waves, which roll on and on. Similarly, the tranquil depths of the storehouse consciousness are disturbed by the wind of discrimination, causing waves, which are analogous to the functioning of the six empirical consciousnesses.

The villain of the piece is the afflicted mind—the wind of discrimination—because it is by means of the afflicted mind that discrimination takes place. The afflicted mind is the go-between that mediates between the storehouse consciousness on the one hand and the six empirical consciousnesses on the other hand. We may call this afflicted mind the ego principle, the principle of individuation, or discrimination.

The storehouse consciousness plays a particularly important role because it not only exists as the tranquil depths of the ocean do but also functions as a repository.

This is why it is called a storehouse—because it collects the seeds of sense impressions and actions. Therefore we can best understand the scheme of the eight consciousnesses presented in the *Lankavatara Sutra* if we picture them in a circle, just as we picture the constituents of interdependent origination. In this sense we have an evolution from the storehouse consciousness in its own nondual nature, through the functioning of discrimination by means of the agency of the afflicted mind, and on into the six empirical consciousnesses, which in turn supply the storehouse consciousness with the impressions of actions, or karma. Thus we have a cyclical process wherein the storehouse consciousness evolves through discrimination into six empirical consciousnesses, which in turn sow the seeds of future actions in the fertile soil of the storehouse consciousness.

The storehouse consciousness is particularly important for the *Lankavatara Sutra* and, indeed, for this whole phase of Mahayana Buddhism. It is significant that, in the Tibetan translation, we find the storehouse consciousness called the "all-base consciousness"—the consciousness that is the substratum of all. This implies that it has within it the potential for both samsara and nirvana, both the phenomenal world and enlightenment. And just as it is through discrimination that the storehouse consciousness evolves into the six empirical consciousnesses, so, through the elimination of discrimination, the storehouse consciousness becomes the seed of nirvana.

It is important to look closely at the relationship between the storehouse consciousness and the notion of the Buddha nature (*tathagatagarbha*, literally, "the womb of tathagatahood"). You will be aware of the natural connection between the two from what I have just said about the nirvanic potential of the storehouse consciousness. The *Lankavatara* describes the mind, or consciousness, as pure in its original, intrinsic nature. What is meant by the term "pure"? A careful examination

of the *Lankavatara Sutra* and other canonical and commentarial literature reveals that this means that the mind is empty. Therefore, "the original purity of the mind" means that the mind is intrinsically and originally pure of the dualities of existence and nonexistence, identity and difference, and so forth. Its purity is equivalent to its emptiness. This purity, or emptiness, is the very essence of Buddha nature, of the nirvanic potential of the storehouse consciousness.

It is in this context that the Buddha nature is likened to gold, to a precious stone, or to a soiled garment. The intrinsic purity or emptiness of the mind finds the expression of its potential in the realization of Buddhahood when the impurities of discrimination are removed. Just as the brightness of gold, a precious stone, or a soiled garment is revealed through refinement and through cleansing of impurities, so one reveals the original, intrinsic, empty and pure nature of the mind through cleansing oneself of the habit of discriminating between subject and object by application of the discipline of a Bodhisattva.

The Buddha nature is the empty and pure nature of the mind. Because of the essential emptiness and purity of the mind, all sentient beings have the potential to attain Buddhahood.

Like a lump of bronze, which can be shaped into a chamber pot, a vessel for offering water at a shrine, or a statue of the Buddha, the empty nature of mind can, depending on causes and conditions, appear in the form of a common living being, a Bodhisattva, or a Buddha.

The Buddha nature is not a self or a soul. It is not a static entity. It may be likened to a stream because it is ever-changing, infinitely manifold and dynamic. It is for this reason that, in another famous sutra, the *Sandhinirmochana*, the Buddha says that the storehouse consciousness is profound and subtle, moving like a stream with all its seeds of sense impressions. The Buddha says that he has not taught the idea of

this storehouse consciousness to fools, for fear that they might mistake it for a self. It is interesting to note that the storehouse consciousness is fundamentally similar to the Theravada concept, found in the Abhidharma, of the factor of subconscious continuity (*bhavanga*) that carries the seeds of former actions. This concept is expanded and elaborated on in the *Lankavatara Sutra* and in the philosophy of the Yogachara school.

The *Lankavatara Sutra* suggests another important Mahayana doctrine in germinal form: the doctrine of the three bodies, or dimensions, of Buddhahood—the transcendental dimension, *(dharmakaya)* the celestial dimension, *(sambhogakaya)* and the terrestrial or transformational dimension, (*nirmanakaya*). These three reflect, in general terms, three levels of enlightened reality: (1) the transcendental dimension is synonymous with the ultimate level of enlightenment, which is beyond names and forms; (2) the celestial dimension is an expression of the symbolic and archetypal dimension of Buddhahood, to which only the spiritually developed have access; and (3) the terrestrial dimension is the dimension of Buddhahood to which all of us in our unenlightened condition have access, and which participates in the world of mundane phenomena. It is this terrestrial dimension that appears in countless forms in order to nurture and emancipate sentient beings.

Here you may recall that the essence of the Mahayana tradition is great compassion. The skillful means that spring directly from great compassion manifest themselves not only in the devising of various disciplines, or vehicles, but also in diverse and countless forms of the terrestrial dimension of Buddhahood. According to the *Lankavatara* and other Mahayana texts, the terrestrial dimension of Buddhahood can assume any form and any number of forms. It can assume not only a recognizable, special form like Shakyamuni Buddha, with whom we are all familiar but also the form of a drunkard, gambler or the like, in order to benefit and liberate

sentient beings. If a particular drunkard or gambler is not affected by the delivery of an exalted Dharma discourse, nor by the examples of moral purity advocated in the conduct of a Bodhisattva, a Buddha or Bodhisattva will assume the form of one of that's persons company and, through the exercise of skillful means labor to bring about the emancipation of that person. In addition to assuming the form of animate beings, Bodhisattvas can also assume the form of inanimate things, such as food, clothing, medicine, a bridge, a road, and so forth. This is put very beautifully by Shantideva in his book on the Practice of the Bodhisattva, *Bodhicharyavatara* where he prays that he may become food for the hungry, medicine for the ill, and shelter for the homeless. Thus, through skillful means born of great compassion, the Buddha and Bodhisattvas appear in countless unknown and unrecognizable forms, working for the emancipation of all sentient beings, each according to his or her individual needs and abilities.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
The Philosophy of the Middle Way

The philosophy of the Middle Way, or Madhyamaka philosophy, has sometimes been called the central philosophy of the Mahayana tradition. It has even been called the central philosophy of Buddhism in general. This alone is sufficient to give us some idea of its importance. The Madhyamaka philosophy has also been called the doctrine of emptiness (*shunyata*) and the doctrine of the non-self-existence, or insubstantiality, of things (*nihsvabhavavada*).

The founder of this philosophy was the great holy man and scholar, Nagarjuna, who lived between the end of the first and the beginning of the second century of the common era. He was born in the south of India, of Brahmin parents. Biographers, however, tell us that he was an early convert to Buddhism. Nagarjuna was an interpreter more than an innovator. He took certain inspirations and insights from the sutras and the Abhidharma, reinterpreting and restating them in a particularly clear and forthright way. He is noted for his substantial literary works, which include not only philosophical works, like the *Foundation Stanzas of the Middle Way* (*Mulamadhyamakakarika*) and the *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness* (*Shunyatasaptati*), but also works on logic, the practices of the Bodhisattva, fundamentals of Buddhism, and even works of a devotional character, such as four works extolling the virtues of qualities like the perfection of wisdom. Nagarjuna's efforts in promoting and propagating the central ideas of the Mahayana won him widespread recognition as a Bodhisattva not only in India but also in Tibet, China, and Japan. He figures

prominently among the primary founders of the Tibetan, and Ch'an, and Zen Buddhist traditions.

The works of Nagarjuna—and, indeed, the teaching of the Madhyamaka philosophy—should not be seen as a radical departure from the general direction and development of Buddhist thought as a whole. They had definite origins in the teachings of the Buddha and in the early Buddhist tradition, particularly the Abhidharma. In the Theravada canon, there is a record of the Buddha's statements about the importance of emptiness (*shunyata*) and also a record of the famous "fourteen inexpressibles," or unanswerable questions. In addition, we find a very clear precursor of the Madhyamaka philosophy in the Perfection of Wisdom literature, where the primary theme is emptiness. This is the very theme elaborated by Nagarjuna in works like his *Mulamadhyamakakarika*. In the Abhidharma Pitaka, in the *Book of Causal Relations* (*Patthana*), too, we can see the anticipation of the Madhyamaka philosophy in the emphasis on the examination of relations. All these are clear indications of the very early and authentic origins of the Madhyamaka philosophy.

Just as the contents of the Madhyamaka philosophy are not anything radically new, so the method of the Madhyamaka is not, but can be found in the very earliest period of the Buddhist tradition. The characteristic method of the Madhyamaka is analysis—the analysis of phenomena and of relations. One might even say that its characteristic method is not only analysis but also critical dialectic. All this methodology—from analysis to criticism and dialectic—is, like the substance of the Madhyamaka, indicated both in the Buddha's own approach in his discourses, the sutras, and in the approach of the Abhidharma tradition, where we find the various alternatives isolated and methods of answering questions elucidated. This should be sufficient to indicate that the origins and methods of the Madhyamaka philosophy go

far back in the history of Buddhist thought.

As for Nagarjuna's fundamental message in his philosophical works, it is important first to realize the object toward which his criticism is directed—namely, the notion of independent being, or self-existence (*svabhava*). The fact that his doctrine has been termed the doctrine of insubstantiality (*nihsvabhavavada*, literally, "the doctrine that refutes *svabhava*") emphasizes Nagarjuna's characteristic rejection of the notion of self-existence.

Nagarjuna rejects self-existence by examining relativity, or interdependent origination, in a critical, dialectic way, beginning with the idea of self-existence, going on to the idea of relativity or the absence of self-existence, and terminating with the idea of emptiness (*shunyata*). These three steps—from self-existence to non-self-existence, and finally to emptiness—are developed through three types of investigation: (1) the investigation of causality, (2) the investigation of concepts, and (3) the investigation of knowledge. Through the investigation of these three classes of phenomena, Nagarjuna and the Madhyamaka system take us from the naive, everyday belief in the idea of self-existence, in the independent reality of phenomena, to an intellectual understanding of emptiness.

Let us first look at the Madhyamaka critique of causality. Madhyamaka philosophy arrives at the insubstantiality and relativity of all phenomena through an examination of interdependent origination. In this context it is shown that, insofar as all things exist dependent on a combination of causes and conditions, they have no independent self-existence and are therefore empty. The classical example is that of the sprout, which exists dependent on the seed, earth, water, air, and sunlight. Inasmuch as the sprout depends on these factors for its existence, it has no self-existence and is therefore without self-existence. And being without self-existence, it is empty. This is the simplest and most direct Madhyamaka investigation of

causality, and it leads us straight to the notion of emptiness.

But for the Madhyamaka, emptiness also means non-origination, non-production. In the Perfection of Wisdom literature, as we saw in the *Heart Sutra*, the idea of non-origination and non-cessation occurs very frequently. Here, too, in the Madhyamaka philosophy, emptiness means non-origination—the non-arising in reality of all phenomena. Nagarjuna explains this particular consequence of emptiness through the dialectic method. Here we see again the fourfold dialectical analysis that appeared in the fourteen inexpressible propositions which the Buddha rejected.

There are four possibilities for the origination of phenomena, or the relationship between cause and effect: (a) that the cause and effect are identical, (b) that the cause and effect are different, (c) that the cause and effect are both identical and different, and (d) that phenomena arise without cause. These four basic alternatives are indicated in the first verse of the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, which states that "No entity is produced at any time, anywhere, or in any manner from self, from other, from both, or without cause." This is the fundamental Madhyamaka critique of causality.

It is interesting to note that these four alternatives are analytically derived. Otherwise, one might wonder how it is that we isolate only these four. The Madhyamaka isolates these four in the following way: If phenomena do originate, they will originate either with a cause or without a cause. Here we already have two fundamental alternatives: phenomena originate either with or without a cause. The latter position is represented in the fourth alternative, according to which phenomena originate without a cause. Now, if we accept that phenomena do originate with a cause, then the effect and the cause can either be identical or different. In this way, we isolate the first two of the four alternatives: the identity of

cause and effect, and the difference of cause and effect. The third alternative—that the cause and effect are both identical and different—is simply a combination of the first two. In this way, we analytically arrive at the four alternatives, each of which is, in turn, to be rejected.

Each of these four explanations of the nature of causality was represented by a philosophical school contemporary with the Madhyamaka. The position that maintains that cause and effect are identical was advocated by the Sankhya system, one of the classical systems of Indian philosophy. The position according to which cause and effect are different was propounded by the Hinayana schools of Buddhism, the Vaibhashikas and the Sautrantikas, and by some of the Brahmanical schools. The position according to which phenomena originate from causes that are both identical and different was affirmed by the Jaina philosophers. The last alternative, which holds that phenomena originate without a cause, was affirmed by the materialists in ancient India.

The Madhyamaka refutes these four explanations of origination by means of a very typical Madhyamaka method that has drawn the attention of many scholars both in the East and the West. This method is called the method of *reductio ad absurdum,* and it is a kind of negative dialectic that exposes the inherent contradictions and absurdities in the opponent's position. Let us try to illustrate how this method of argumentation works. Take the first alternative, which affirms the identity of cause and effect. The Madhyamaka says that, if in fact cause and effect are identical, then having bought cottonseed with the price one would pay for cloth, one ought to be able to clothe oneself with it. The idea that cause and effect are identical thus leads to absurdity. If cause and effect are identical, then there would be no difference between father and son, and also no difference between food and

excrement.

In the case of the second alternative—that cause and effect are different—anything could originate from anything else, because all phenomena are equally different. Hence a stalk of rice might just as easily originate from a piece of coal as from a grain of rice, for there would be no connection between a stalk of rice and a grain of rice, and a piece of coal and a grain of rice would have the same relationship of difference to a stalk of rice. Thus the notion that cause and effect are absolutely different is an intrinsically absurd idea.

The third alternative—that cause and effect are both identical and different—is no more acceptable, and suffers from two faults. First, both the argument that refuted the identity of cause and effect and the argument that refuted the difference of cause and effect are applicable to the third alternative as well. The argument refuting the identity of cause and effect is applicable insofar as cause and effect are identical, and the argument refuting their difference is applicable insofar as cause and effect are different. We really have no new proposition in the case of the third alternative. Second, the third alternative is faulty because of the law of contradiction: no phenomenon can have contradictory characteristics. An entity cannot be both existent and nonexistent at once, just as one entity cannot be both red and not red at the same time.

Finally, the fourth alternative—the idea that phenomena originate without cause—is rejected by appeal to common experience. For instance, if we set a kettle of water on a lighted stove, the water will boil, but if we set it on a block of ice, it won't. Hence Madhyamaka philosophy concludes that causality according to any one of these four alternatives—from self, from other, from both, and without cause—is impossible. This is the Madhyamaka critique of causality.

There is also a Madhyamaka critique of concepts—the concepts of identity and

difference, existence and nonexistence, and so forth. All these concepts are relative; they are mutually conditioning. Let us take the concepts of short and long. The ideas of short and long are relative one to the other. We say that A is shorter than B or that B is longer than C, so the concepts of long and short are relative. If I put two fingers side by side, we can say that one finger is longer than the other, but if I put out a single finger, unrelated to anything else, we cannot say anything about it being long or short. This is another kind of interdependence. Just as we have material dependence in the origin of a sprout that is dependent on a seed, the earth, sunlight, and so on, here we have conceptual dependence, the dependence of one concept on another.

And just as short and long are dependent one upon another, so identity and difference are dependent, or relative, to each other. Identity only has meaning in relation to difference, and difference only makes sense in relation to identity. The same is true of existence and nonexistence. Without the idea of existence, nonexistence has no meaning, and without nonexistence, existence has none. This is also true of the three divisions of time—past, present, and future. Depending on the past, the ideas of the present and future are conceived; depending on the past and future, we speak about the present; and depending on the present and the past, we speak about the future. The three moments of time—like short and long, identity and difference, and existence and nonexistence—are all concepts that are interdependent, relative, and empty.

Finally, the analysis of relativity is applied to knowledge, or to the means of acquiring knowledge. This is an important application of the Madhyamaka critique because ordinarily we accept the reality of phenomena on the basis of perception. For example, we say that this cup which I have before me undoubtedly exists because I perceive it—I can see and touch it. We have knowledge of things through the means

of knowledge. Traditionally, in India, there were four means of knowledge: (i) perception, (ii) inference, (iii) testimony, and (iv) comparison.

For the sake of simplicity, let us take the case of perception. Suppose something is established by perception, that it is through perception that we accept the existence of the cup: What, then, is it that proves the existence (or truth) of the perception itself (i.e., the means of knowledge itself)? One might say that perception is proved by itself. In that case it would not require proof, but since when can something be accepted without proof?

Alternatively, one might say that perception is established or proved by other means of knowledge, but in that case we have an infinite regress, as in the old story of the philosopher who, when asked what the earth stood on, replied that it stood on a great tortoise, and when asked what the great tortoise stood on, said that it stood on four great elephants, and so on and so forth. Nowhere can we find a firm foundation for perception if perception is proved by other means of knowledge.

Finally, if perception is established by the object of perception, then perception and its object are mutually established and interdependent. This is, in fact, the case: The subject and object of perception are interdependent. They are mutually conditioned. Perception is therefore in no position to prove the existence of its object, and that object is in no position to prove the existence of perception, since they depend on each other. Thus knowledge—like cause and effect and mutually related concepts—is interdependent. It lacks self-existence, and is therefore empty. Nagarjuna composed a very interesting text, called *The Turning Away of Objections* (*Vigrahavyavartani*) which discusses this point.

Let us now consider some of the more practical, therapeutic applications of the Madhyamaka philosophy. The Madhyamaka uses the critical and dialectical method to reject the notions of cause and effect, mutually related concepts, and the subject

and object of knowledge because these notions are the products of imagination, or discriminating thought (*vikalpa*). The Madhyamaka is concerned with dispelling these products of discriminating thought because they are the causes of suffering. It is as a result of discriminating the ideas of cause and effect, identity and difference, existence and nonexistence, and so forth that we are imprisoned in samsara. Discriminating thought, which has its seed in the mind, is the fundamental cause of suffering.

Nagarjuna says that, just as a painter, having painted the picture of a fearful demon, is then terrified by that image, so ignorant people, through discriminating thought, produce the cycle of the six realms of existence and then suffer as a consequence. Hence mind, which is afflicted by ignorance through the function of discriminating thought, produces the world we know, or samsara, where the concepts of causality, origination, cessation, and the rest have a meaning. This is the origin of suffering. And if samsara is the product of discriminating thought—if cause and effect, identity and difference, and existence and nonexistence are actually relative and empty—then there is no objective difference between samsara and nirvana.

What the renowned Mahayana and Madhyamaka doctrine of the non-differentiation of samsara and nirvana means is that the difference between samsara and nirvana is a subjective difference, a difference within one's own mind. It is not a difference in anything objective or real. Samsara and nirvana are the same thing seen from two different points of view: from the point of view of ignorance (of causality, identity and difference, existence and nonexistence), reality appears as samsara; from the point of view of insubstantiality, relativity, and emptiness, however, reality appears as nirvana.

Thus samsara and nirvana do not depend on anything "out there": they depend,

rather, on the point of view. It is in this context that the portrayal of nirvana emphasizes the fact that it is beyond existence and nonexistence, beyond origination and cessation, beyond all conceptions and expressions. Indeed, if nirvana is unconditioned, it must transcend these relative concepts. The two points of view—that of discriminating thought and ignorance, and that of insubstantiality, relativity, and emptiness—are reflected in the doctrine of the two truths, conventional and ultimate. The conventional truth is valid of this world in which ignorance prevails, in which we operate by accepting—and taking for granted—the ideas of cause and effect, identity and difference, existence and nonexistence, and the like. The ultimate truth is valid of this world seen in the light of insubstantiality, relativity, and emptiness. Like samsara and nirvana, the conventional truth and ultimate truth are not contradictory but complementary. They refer to two points of view—the ordinary, afflicted point of view obscured by ignorance, and the point of view of the enlightened ones.

Nagarjuna said that without relying on the conventional truth, the ultimate truth is not taught, and without arriving at the ultimate truth, nirvana is not achieved. In these few words, we can understand the complementary and necessary relationship between the two truths. We must rely on the conventional truth to communicate and function in the world, yet without arriving at an understanding of ultimate reality, or emptiness, nirvana is not gained. Hence we can see how groundless is the charge of nihilism leveled against the Madhyamaka by some of its opponents. Emptiness is not nothingness. The Madhyamaka does not teach the absolute nonexistence of cause and effect, or karma (wholesome and unwholesome actions with their consequences). All these exist on the conventional level. They exist as long as they are sustained by discriminating thought and ignorance. Without relying on the notion of cause and effect, or the doctrine of karma, the ultimate is not taught; yet without transcending

causality, karma, concepts, and expressions, nirvana is not achieved.

Nagarjuna asserts that interdependent origination, emptiness, and the Middle Way are identical in significance. Taken from the point of view of ignorance, interdependent origination explains, sustains, and is the very essence of samsara. But interdependent origination is also emptiness, because everything that exists dependent on something else does not really exist—it has no independent being and does not exist by itself. Therefore, it is empty. All that is interdependent origination is also emptiness. And interdependent origination which avoids the alternatives of identity and difference, existence and nonexistence, eternalism and nihilism is also the Middle Way taught by the Buddha. Hence the system founded by Nagarjuna and sustained by his disciples and successors is known as the philosophy of the Middle Way, or Madhyamaka.

CHAPTER NINETEEN
The Philosophy of Mind Only

The Mind Only school and the Middle Way school are the philosophical backbone of the Mahayana tradition. There are several names by which the Mind Only school is known, the three most popular being Chittamatra (school affirming Mind Only), Vijnanavada (school affirming consciousness), and Yogachara (school affirming the unity of meditation and action). Yogachara refers to the union of the practice of meditation (*yoga*) and conduct (*achara*). The Mind Only school arose as an independent and identifiable philosophical tradition in the fourth century C.E.

Two brothers, Asanga and Vasubandhu, played a central role in the formulation and popularization of the philosophy of this school. They were born in Northwest India, in what is now Pakistan. Through their writings and skill as teachers and debaters, they popularized the Mind Only philosophy within a relatively short time. Both started out as realistic pluralists, and in addition to his many works on the Mind Only philosophy, Vasubandhu is well known for his *Abhidharmakosha,* a collection of Abhidharma philosophy written from the standpoint of the Vaibhashika school.

These two great scholars were converted to Mahayana and together produced a large number of works defining, categorizing, and setting forth the Mind Only philosophy. Asanga is famous for his *Stages of the Bodhisattva Path* (*Bodhisattvabhumi*), *Compendium of the Abhidharma* (*Abhidharmasamuchchaya*), written from the Mahayana or Mind Only viewpoint, and many commentaries on

major works of the Mind Only school. Vasubandhu is renowned for his short treatises on *Cognition Only* and a treatise explaining the three natures of the Mind Only philosophy.

Asanga's commentaries to a number of important texts of the Mind Only school are attributed by the Mahayana tradition to Lord Maitreya. Although modern scholars have attempted to identify Maitreya with a historical personality, the Mahayana tradition has no doubt that Maitreya is the future Buddha, now residing in Tushita Heaven. The major works of the Mind Only school attributed to him include the *Distinction of the Middle from the Extremes* (*Madhyantavibhaga*) and the *Ornament of the Mahayana* (*Mahayanasutralankara).* They are said to have been transmitted by Maitreya to Asanga, who wrote them down and added commentaries. It is in this sense that a large portion of the textual foundation of the Mind Only philosophy is attributed to the future Buddha Maitreya.

Like the Middle Way philosophy, the Mind Only philosophy has its origin in the earliest tradition of Buddhism. For example, even according to the Theravada canon, the Buddha declared that mind is the creator of all things and referred to the luminous and pure nature of consciousness. The body of Mahayana sutras includes many discourses, like the *Lankavatara Sutra,* that deal at some length with the fundamental principles of the Mind Only philosophy. A long and weighty textual tradition thus precedes the emergence of the Mind Only tradition as an independent philosophical school.

In addition to these textual anticipations in the canons of the Hinayana and Mahayana traditions, we find conceptual antecedents of the Mind Only philosophy in the course of the development of Buddhist thought. We all know that mind has been extremely important in Buddhism from the beginning. We need only remember the Buddha's affirmation of the creative role of the mind to realize what a central

place mind has in Buddhist thought, or look at the thirty-seven factors conducive to enlightenment to be struck by how many of them have to do with the mind.

The central importance of mind continued in the Vaibhashika and Sautrantika schools, two realistic and pluralistic schools that flourished prior to the emergence of the Middle Way and Mind Only schools. The Vaibhashika took its name from commentaries composed during the Fourth Buddhist Council, in the first century C.E. It is perhaps the most atomistic, realistic, and pluralistic of the Indian schools, and is even more pluralistic and realistic than the Theravada school of Sri Lanka. The Vaibhashikas advocated the doctrine of the two natures of factors (*dharmas*)—the phenomenal nature and the eternal nature. This eternal nature has sometimes been likened to Plato's doctrine of ideas in Greek philosophy.

The Sautrantika takes its name from the fact that it wanted to return to the original teachings of the Buddha contained in the sutras. This is the school that rejected the authenticity of the Abhidharma. The Sautrantikas are interesting philosophically because they emphasized the role of conceptualization, or discrimination (*vikalpa*). They rejected the independent, objective reality of many of the factors the Vaibhashikas accepted, ascribing these *dharmas* to the functioning of discrimination or imagination. This goes some way toward the standpoint of the Mind Only school, which eventually denied the objective reality of all objects and affirmed the sole reality of mind.

In addition, the Sautrantikas formulated a very interesting theory of perception. They believed that we never really know external objects directly and that what we perceive—what we take to be an external object (for example, the cup in front of me)—is a mental reflection or representation of that object, so that the process of perception is the process of perceiving mental reflections of external objects. The Sautrantikas claimed that these mental representations are the effects of external

objects. Consequently, they held that we know of the existence of external objects by inference. The mental images or reflections of an external object are evidence of that object's existence, although we cannot know it directly.

This theory is very similar to John Locke's representative theory of perception. What I find important about this view is that if it is accepted, it leaves the status of the external world in a very precarious position, since we would never know objects in themselves but only the objectified contents of our consciousness. By thus emphasizing the role of conceptualization or imagination, this philosophical development of the Sautrantikas anticipates the full-fledged mentalist philosophy of the Mind Only school, which claims that the apparently real objects of the world are none other than mind.

There are a number of lines along which the Mind Only philosophy developed its doctrine of the primacy of consciousness. Its adherents were convinced that objects depend on mind for their nature and being. First, the school put forward the view that a single object appears differently to different sentient beings. This argument is worked out with respect to the six realms of existence. For example, a cup of milk appears to us as milk, but it would appear as nectar to the gods, as molten iron to hell beings, and as pus or blood to hungry ghosts. A single object appears differently to different beings in samsara according to their respective karma. In other words, an object appears in different forms according to the conditioned, subjective state of the mind. We can see this even without reference to the six realms. For example, a woman may appear as an object of sexual attraction to a man, a heap of meat to a wolf, and a skeleton to an Arhat. This is the first argument the Mind Only school used in support of its subjectivist view of experience.

Second, the Mind Only school made extensive use of the analogy of dreaming, arguing that in dreams the mind creates and projects a world which, for all intents

and purposes, it experiences as real as long as the dream state prevails. If we look at Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses on Cognition Only* we can see how he rejects several objections to this argument by analogy. For example, opponents of this view said that dream experience is not collective the way waking experience is, to which Vasubandhu countered that we do experience events in common with the other figures in a given dream. Opponents also said that dream experience is not effective and does not have the power to bring about real effects, yet Vasubandhu showed, by using the example of nocturnal emission, that this is not so. In short, if we look closely at dream experience, we will be forced to admit that, as long as we are in a dream state, there are no reasonable grounds on which we can distinguish it from waking experience.

It is interesting to note that this analogy has received some support in recent years from the evidence of experiments in the field of sensory deprivation. These experiments place volunteers in situations where they are cut off from all sensory stimuli; some subjects then begin to create, out of their own minds, an entire three-dimensional universe. It would follow that the Mind Only argument developed on the analogy of dream experience has a certain amount of cogency.

Third, the Mind Only school rejected the independent existence of objects by exposing the infinite divisibility of matter. This is another early conceptual conclusion reached by the Buddhist tradition that has recently been confirmed by scientific discoveries. Mind Only philosophers argued that the notion of an atom—an irreducible unit of matter—is impossible. They argued this on the grounds of the necessity of the combination or collection of atoms in order to produce a mass, an extended material object.

The atom was thought to be unitary and indivisible, and was therefore held to be without parts, yet it was thought that objects (like a cup or a table) are collections

of atoms that form extended objects. Objects acquire mass through the collecting together of countless atoms in an assembly. If atoms are indivisible and without parts, then it will be impossible for them to assemble together. However, if atoms assemble, as they must, to form extended material objects, then each atom must have at least six distinguishable parts: an upper part, a lower part, and an eastern, southern, western, and northern part.

By means of this argument, Vasubandhu and other Mind Only philosophers established the concept of the infinite divisibility of the atom. This conclusion has been verified by modern physics, so once again we have an early analytical conception that has been confirmed experimentally by discoveries of modern science. The atom as well as its components have been shown to be reducible to even smaller components, and we have finally arrived at a point in time when there is precious little evidence of any ultimate element of matter.

Through these arguments rejecting the existence of material objects, Mind Only philosophers established the relativity of subject and object, the identity of the objects of consciousness with consciousness itself. They revealed what we might call the nonduality of the subject and object of consciousness—of consciousness and its contents.

I want now to touch upon a conception which appears in the *Lankavatara Sutra* and to which Vasubandhu devoted one of his more famous works, the Exposition of the Three Natures. This is a doctrine very important to Mind Only philosophy, namely, the doctrine of the three natures, or levels, of reality: (1) the illusory or imputed nature (*parikalpita*), (2) the dependent or relative nature (*paratantra*), and (3) the perfected or accomplished nature (*parinishpanna*).

These three natures may be likened respectively to (a) the mistaken belief that water exists in a mirage; (b) the appearance itself of the mirage, dependent on

atmospheric causes and conditions; and (c) the empty nature of the mirage, inasmuch as it is conditioned, relative, and dependent on causes and conditions. The belief that water exists in the mirage is utterly false and is similar to the illusory nature. The simple appearance of the mirage relative to causes and conditions is similar to the dependent nature. The empty character of the mirage, inasmuch as it is dependent and conditioned, is similar to the perfected nature.

It is necessary to draw particular attention to the second of the three natures, the dependent nature, because it is this nature that is central in the Mind Only philosophy, insofar as it is concerned with liberation and emancipation. The dependent nature is identical with mind, and particularly with the storehouse consciousness, which we discussed in our consideration of the *Lankavatara Sutra* (see Chapter 17). What this means is that in this dependent nature we have, on the one hand, the potential to produce the illusory prison of samsara and, on the other, the potential for the liberation of nirvana.

I have said that the storehouse consciousness was termed by the Tibetans "the all-base consciousness," and that in that sense it is the root of samsara and nirvana. Here, too, we can see, on the one hand, how the dependent nature, if it is objectified by discrimination of an external object, results in the fabrication by mind of an external world, which is samsara. If the mind discriminates an external object—bifurcates this dependent nature into subject and object—then we have the creation of the illusory nature, that is to say, the imposition of false ideas (such as the idea of the existence of water in a mirage, or of the self and other): in a word, we have samsara.

On the other hand, if this dependent nature, which is identical with the storehouse consciousness, is purified of discriminating thought and the emptiness of subject and object is realized, then the storehouse consciousness results in the

perfected nature; it results in freedom. The dependent nature is therefore the central nature of the three. If played upon by discrimination, it becomes illusion, samsara; if played upon by the knowledge of the abandonment of duality, it becomes nirvana.

It is interesting to note that this dependent nature is also the source of the phenomenalizing activity of the enlightened beings. In other words, the dependent nature, or storehouse consciousness, supplies the potential for the emanation of all forms, the forms of the terrestrial dimension and those of the celestial dimension—the heavenly Bodhisattvas like Manjushri and Avalokiteshvara, who work for the enlightenment of all sentient beings.

You will recall that, in the example of the mirage, it is the notion of the existence of water that belongs to the illusory nature; the mere appearance of the mirage as a pure, conditioned phenomenon belongs to the dependent nature. We might interpret this in terms of experience—that is, the experience of subject and object as different. The notion that an external object exists independent of consciousness, or mind, belongs to the realm of the illusory nature, whereas the appearance of phenomena without the mistaken notions of their objectivity and independence belongs to the dependent nature.

This dependent nature is thus intrinsically pure and can function in an altruistic way for the liberation of others. It is in this sense that the three natures in the Mind Only system correspond to the three dimensions of Buddhahood: the illusory nature corresponds to the terrestrial dimension, the dependent nature to the celestial dimension, and the perfected nature to the transcendental dimension. Therefore, when Buddhas appear as objective historical personalities, this is the appearance of the dependent nature—in the guise of subject-object duality—in the sphere of the illusory nature. When Buddhas appear free from the duality of subject and object, in the ideal form of celestial Bodhisattvas like Manjushri and Avalokiteshvara, this is an

appearance of the celestial dimension, of the dependent nature free from the illusion of subject-object duality.

I would like to conclude by underlining what I believe to be the very close correspondence between the philosophies of Mind Only and the Middle Way. You will recall that we have the conceptions of samsara and nirvana in the Middle Way philosophy, just as we do in the whole of Buddhist thought. In addition, we have two pedagogical concepts—those of conventional truth and ultimate truth, which refer respectively to samsara and nirvana.

What is it in the philosophy of the Middle Way that mediates between conventional truth and ultimate truth, between samsara and nirvana? How is it that eventually we have an identity, or non-differentiation, of samsara and nirvana professed in the Middle Way school? If we look at the Middle Way philosophy, we find that interdependent origination is the principle that unites conventional and ultimate truth, samsara and nirvana. In the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Nagarjuna says that if we take interdependent origination as the relationship between cause and effect, we have samsara, but if we take interdependent origination as non-causal—as emptiness—we have nirvana. The link between cause and effect, between karma and its consequences, is conceptualization or imagination. Nagarjuna says clearly that imagination is responsible for the connection between cause and effect. This, in general, is the scheme we find in the Middle Way school.

When we look at the Mind Only philosophy, we see that it runs parallel to that of the Middle Way. The conventional truth in the Middle Way philosophy is similar to the illusory nature of Mind Only philosophy, and in both systems this corresponds to cause and effect, to samsara. The ultimate truth in the Middle Way philosophy is similar to the perfected nature in the Mind Only philosophy, and in both systems this corresponds to emptiness, nonduality, non-origination, and nirvana. What in the

Middle Way school is interdependent origination—the link between samsara and nirvana—is the dependent nature in the Mind Only school.

Mind is of the utmost importance to both interdependent origination and the dependent nature. Mind is the essence of both. In both systems we have the conventional, samsaric, illusory reality on the one hand, and the ultimate, nirvanic, perfected reality on the other; mediating between the two is the principle of relativity, the principle of dependence, which is of the essence of mind. In Chapter 20 we will further explore the parallelism between the Middle Way philosophy and the Mind Only philosophy. We will then try to apply the combined vision of these philosophies to the practice of the Mahayana path.

CHAPTER TWENTY
The Development of Mahayana Philosophy

In this chapter I would like to consider the further development of Mahayana philosophy in India, the relationship between the Middle Way philosophy and the Mind Only philosophy, and how these two influence the religious and practical traditions of Buddhism. We have discussed the Middle Way and Mind Only philosophies in Chapters 18 and 19, but have merely sketched the outlines of Mahayana philosophy. The philosophy of the Middle Way, as presented by Nagarjuna, and that of Mind Only, as presented by Asanga and Vasubandhu, are the twofold basis of the Mahayana tradition, forming its general foundation as it evolved during the first four centuries of the common era.

This period was followed by another eight hundred years of philosophical development of the Mahayana tradition in India, not to mention its continuing development in the other countries of Asia to which Buddhism traveled—China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, and Mongolia. To gain a comprehensive picture of this development in India, I would like to trace the interaction between the Middle Way and Mind Only schools from the fourth century C.E. to the end of the first millennium.

Let us look first at what took place in the Middle Way school. The principles set forth by Nagarjuna were elaborated by his disciples and successors, beginning with Aryadeva. Whereas Nagarjuna's primary concern had been to establish the authenticity of the philosophy of emptiness in opposition to the earlier schools of

Buddhist philosophy, Aryadeva's was to demonstrate that the philosophy of emptiness was equally valid in the case of the non-Buddhist Brahmanical and Vedantic schools.

The works of Nagarjuna and Aryadeva fall within the formative and fundamental period of the philosophy of the Middle Way. The period after Nagarjuna saw the emergence of two Middle Way sub-schools, the Prasangika and the Svatantrika. The division between these two schools is based on how they present the philosophy of emptiness.

When we discussed the philosophy of emptiness in Chapter 18, we spoke about a characteristic method of argument, the *reductio ad absurdum*, that Middle Way philosophers used to reject the positions advanced by their opponents. In Sanskrit this form of argument is called *prasanga*, and it was from this term that the Prasangika school took its name. *Arguments ad absurdum* are designed to expose contradictions and absurdities in opponents' positions. For example, the theory of self-production (i.e., that entities originate from existent things) was advocated by a rival of the Prasangikas, the Sankhya philosophical school. Self-production can be refuted by the argument that if entities originated from themselves, then they would go on originating indefinitely and we would have an endless series of reproductions of the same existing entities. In other words, there would be nothing new under the sun. The *prasanga* argument is that entities do not originate from themselves because they already exist, and the origination of something that already exists is plainly absurd. Besides, if existent entities do originate, then they will go on reproducing themselves ad infinitum.

Alternatively, one might reject the Sankhya theory of self-production by means of a syllogism. This form of argument is called an independent (*svatantra*) argument, and it is from this term that the Svatantrika school got its name. One might illustrate

this method of argument by saying, "Entities do not originate from themselves." This would be the proposition, the first so-called member of an independent argument. Then one might say, "This is because they exist," which would be the second member, the reason of the syllogism. Next, one might say, "They exist like a jar does," which would be the example, and the third and final member By means of these three members of a syllogism, one might demonstrate the impossibility of origination from self—the same objective demonstrated by an argument *ad absurdum*.

We have, therefore, two forms of argument, a reduction and a syllogism conforming to the rules of formal logic. Buddhapalita and Chandrakirti are famous for their expositions championing the *reductio ad absurdum*, while Bhavaviveka is famous for championing syllogistic, independent argument. Both the Prasangika and the Svatantrika school enjoyed considerable popularity in India. The strength of the Svatantrika school reflected an increasing concern with conforming to accepted standards of logic. It was common for rival Indian philosophical schools to engage in public debates, which tended to require arguments that met accepted standards of validity. This led gradually to more formal requirements of discussion and influenced the philosophical arguments of the Middle Way school, contributing to the popularity of the Svatantrika sub-school, which favored the use of independent argument. This trend even led the Prasangika sub-school to gradually refine and formalize its *argument ad absurdum*, so that within the course of a few hundred years, a much more formal presentation of the philosophy of emptiness emerged.

Just as this was taking place within the Middle Way school, developments were also occurring within the Mind Only school. The next significant Mind Only philosophers in India were the fifth century Buddhist logicians Dinnaga and Dharmakirti, who also played a significant role in the development of the Mind Only

philosophy. They rejected the existence of the objects of consciousness—of forms, sounds, and so forth—present in experience, and are therefore known as the philosophers who reject the representations of consciousness. Whereas both Asanga and Vasubandhu affirmed the existence of the objects of consciousness, insofar as these participate in the reality of mind, Dinnaga and Dharmakirti maintained that, although the reality of consciousness is indubitable, the reality of the forms, or objects, of consciousness is not.

In about the eighth century C.E., there arose in India a figure of note, a scholar who made a very important contribution to the integration of these different tendencies within Mahayana philosophy. His name was Shantarakshita. In addition to the fame he won as a result of his philosophical and literary production, Shantarakshita was the first to introduce systematic Buddhist thought to Tibet. He formulated what we now call the syncretic or synthetic philosophy that unites in a systematic way the philosophy of emptiness and the philosophy of Mind Only.

We have discussed the importance of mind in the thought of the Middle Way school, and also the parallelism between conventional truth and ultimate truth on the one hand and the illusory and perfected natures on the other. We indicated the parallel status of mind, interdependence, and the dependent nature in the Middle Way and Mind Only schools (see Chapter 19). What we have in the thought of Shantarakshita is a systematic integration of the major tenets of the Middle Way and the Mind Only schools, so that emptiness is acknowledged to be consistent with ultimate truth and the perfected nature, while the creative nature of consciousness is acknowledged to be consistent with the conventional truth and the illusory nature.

In addition to the reconciliation and stratification of the principle tenets of these two schools, Shantarakshita's philosophy integrates the elements of logical argument and treats systematically the role of mind in the origination and cessation of

suffering. In his syncretic philosophy we have what we might term the apex of the development of Mahayana philosophy in India, in that Shantarakshita correlated and synthesized, in one coherent philosophical system, the principal insights of outstanding Mahayana masters like Nagarjuna, Asanga, and Vasubandhu.

The synthesis of the tenets of emptiness and Mind Only had a direct and determining impact on the two major traditions that grew out of Mahayana philosophy: (1) the Vajrayana, which held sway in Tibet and Mongolia, and (2) the Ch'an Zen tradition, which was predominant in China and Japan. Although these two traditions of practice differ markedly in the forms of their religious expression, both rely very heavily on the tenets of emptiness and Mind Only for their function and effectiveness.

In the Vajrayana, it is the philosophy of emptiness which supplies the openness and fluidity that allows for the transformation of phenomena from an impure condition to a pure condition. If entities had an independent and unchanging nature and were therefore not empty, it would be impossible to transform impure experience saturated by suffering into pure experience suffused by great bliss. While emptiness supplies the ground upon which this transformation can take place, mind supplies the effective means of achieving that transformation, because it is the mind that shapes and determines the nature of our experience. By controlling, disciplining, and manipulating the mind, we can change our experience from an impure experience to a pure experience. In the theory and practice of the Vajrayana tradition, emptiness and mind are indispensable—both because, without emptiness, transformation of things would be impossible, and because it is mind that is the key to and means of achieving that transformation.

In the Ch'an and Zen tradition, it is emptiness that is descriptive of the real state of things. It is the realization of emptiness that brings about the transcendence of

duality and the attainment of enlightenment. And how is this emptiness realized in this tradition? By looking at the mind—by meditating on the nature of mind itself. Here, as in the Vajrayana, emptiness and mind perform similar functions and are indispensable. Emptiness is the ground of transformation, while mind accomplishes that transformation.

Thus it is not coincidental that both the Vajrayana and the Ch'an and Zen traditions look to these fundamental ideas of the Indian Mahayana for their inspiration. Nagarjuna and Asanga are traditionally regarded as the founders of the Vajrayana tradition; Nagarjuna is also one of the early patriarchs of the Ch'an and Zen tradition. Bodhidharma, who introduced Ch'an to China, is said to have favored the *Lankavatara Sutra* above all other texts. In this way, the Middle Way and Mind Only schools played an important role in the development of the principal traditions of Mahayana practice throughout Asia.

Let us spend some time looking at the method of investigation that was developed in India in line with the insights of the Middle Way and Mind Only schools. The fundamental division of experience into subject (*nama*) and object (*rupa*), found in the scheme of the five aggregates and in many of the analytical schemes of the Abhidharma, is also present in the Mahayana context. We can see the investigation of reality unfolding in this binary way with respect first to the object and then to the subject.

In investigating the object and the subject, two methods are used that we have encountered in other Buddhist traditions also—namely, the analytical method and the relational method (see Chapter 16). Beginning with the object, we find first an analytical investigation of the object applied. This means, in the Mahayana context, a consideration of the infinite divisibility of the object. We have discussed the importance of the infinite divisibility of matter in the formulation of Mind Only

philosophy (see Chapter 19). Here, too, we begin with the investigation and revelation of matter's infinite divisibility.

This analytical investigation of the object is followed by a relational investigation of the object, which reveals that the object depends on the subject—that is, on consciousness. In this way, we arrive at the rejection of the notion of an independent object both analytically and relationally.

We then proceed to analytical and relational investigation of the subject, the mind itself. When we investigate mind analytically, we do so in terms of its characteristics. The paradigm for this is in the Perfection of Wisdom literature, which says, "Examine the mind: Is it long or short? Is it round or square? Is it white, blue, or otherwise?" Such an analytical investigation reveals that the mind is inherently unidentifiable.

This analytical investigation of the subject is followed by a relational investigation, which reveals that the subject (mind) is relationally dependent on the object. Shantideva; one of the renowned masters of the Middle Way school said that, without an object, consciousness is unintelligible, incomprehensible. Consciousness must have an object in order to function, in order to exist. Consciousness independent of an object is impossible. Explanations of the truth of this statement date back a long way. For example, in the Abhidharma literature, it is said that consciousness arises dependent on an object.

The analytical and relational investigations of object and subject lead to an understanding of reality as ineffable—as beyond existence and nonexistence, as empty and luminous. In the Mahayana tradition, this is the ultimate realization: Reality cannot be described in terms of existence and nonexistence. It is empty, luminous, and pure. Reality is beyond existence because all existence is relative and dependent. It is beyond nonexistence because, despite its emptiness and transience,

reality does appear and is experienced. Therefore, reality is not altogether nonexistent.

You may recall our use of the word "pure" as a synonym of empty. Here we have another word used, "luminous." You need not be confused by this. It is simply a restatement of that equivalence set forth in the *Heart Sutra*'s assertion that "Emptiness is form, and form is emptiness." Reality is not only empty: it is also form; it is also luminous, bright with the potential for appearance. This luminosity—this potential inherent in the real state of things—manifests itself to the impure, afflicted consciousness as samsara, but it manifests itself to the purified consciousness as the pure universe of the exalted Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. It is within the context of this luminosity, this potential appearance of reality, that we have the manifestation of the celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas like Amitabha, Akshobhya, Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, and the rest. They are luminous, pure, and the bright manifestation of reality—that reality which is simultaneously emptiness and luminosity, emptiness and purity. Emptiness and luminosity are the characteristics of reality that emerge from the Mahayanic investigation of the subject and object of experience.

Let me conclude by describing a practical mode of contemplation which reflects this progressive insight that eventually reveals the ineffable character of the real. This contemplative technique of meditation unfolds through four stages.

The first stage involves contemplation of the mind-dependent nature of all experience. On this stage we are asked to regard all experience as similar to a dream. This is reinforced by recourse to examples that illustrate the mind-dependent nature of experience: not only the experience of dreaming, which is perhaps the most telling but also that of illness, when one perceives a white conch as yellow because of jaundice, and the experience of altered perception as a result of the ingestion of

hallucinogenic substances.

On the second stage we contemplate all experience being like a magical show. Like dreaming, this example has an old and venerable history in Buddhist literature, both in the Perfection of Wisdom discourses and in the writings of the Middle Way and Mind Only traditions. Here the example of a magical illusion is used as a paradigm for experience: When the apparatus needed to produce a magical illusion is present, the magical illusion appears, but when the apparatus is absent, the magical illusion does not. In the same way, entities appear only when the right causes and conditions are present, and fail to appear when the right causes and conditions are absent.

We might feel that this example of magical illusion is no longer relevant today, but this is not the case if we understand magical illusion in a broader sense. Some of you may be familiar with holography—the projection of a laser beam so as to produce a three-dimensional image of an object. The image does not really exist; if we reach out for that object—an apple, let us say—it is not there. When the holographic apparatus is present, the illusion of the three-dimensional object appears, but when it is absent, the illusion does not. Like a magical illusion and a holographic image, all experiences appear relative to the presence of certain causes and conditions, and do not appear when the right causes and conditions are not present.

On the third stage, we are encouraged to contemplate all experience as relative, as interdependent. This follows very closely from the consideration of all experience as similar to a magical illusion. All experience appears relative to causes and conditions. The sprout exists relative to the seed, earth, water, sunlight, and air. The flame in an oil lamp exists relative to the wick and the oil. In this way all phenomena

appear relative to causes and conditions, and all experience is interdependent.

The fourth stage in the process of progressive realization of the ultimate nature of things is contemplation of the inexpressibility of experience. The interdependence of experience means that experience is inexpressible in terms of existence and nonexistence, identity and difference, and so forth. Entities and their causes can be said to be neither identical nor different. For example, whether the sprout and the seed are identical or different is inexpressible: they cannot be described in terms of either identity or difference. Experience in general is intrinsically indescribable, like the sensation of being tickled or the feeling that ensues as a consequence of sexual intercourse. Similarly, all entities that exist dependent on causes and conditions are inexpressible in terms of absolute existence and nonexistence. Hence this last stage involves the contemplation of all things as inexpressible and ineffable.

By means of this four-stage process of contemplating all experience as mind-dependent—like a dream, like a magical illusion, interdependent, and, finally, inexpressible—we can arrive at some understanding of the Mahayana view of reality. For the Mahayana tradition, reality is empty, luminous, and beyond existence and nonexistence, identity and difference, and all the other dichotomies of discriminating thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
Mahayana Buddhism in Practice

We have looked at the origins of the Mahayana tradition and at three representative sutras that belong to the formative period of its canonical literature. We have also looked at the development of Mahayana exegetical thought, at the doctrine of emptiness, at the central importance of mind in the Buddhist tradition, and, in so doing, at the philosophies of the Middle Way and Mind Only schools. Finally, we have discussed the subsequent syncretic development of Mahayana philosophy. Having done all this, it is important to devote some time to the practice of the Mahayana path. The Mahayana is not only a highly developed and profound philosophy and psychology, it is also an accessible, dynamic vehicle for the achievement of Buddhahood. Although religious and philosophical developments may be its backbone, the Mahayana is also a very attractive and vibrant path to many people in different cultures throughout Asia and in parts of the Western world.

It is said that the Mahayana path begins with the awakening of the enlightenment thought (*bodhichitta*). But even before the awakening of *bodhichitta,* there are certain important preliminaries that need to be cultivated if one is to embark on the path to Buddhahood. As we examine briefly these preliminary practices, it will become clear that the Mahayana is not a path different from or independent of the Buddhist path as a whole. Rather, it is an enhancement of the Buddhist path in general.

The first of the preliminary practices is the cultivation of faith, or confidence.

Like a seed, faith is said to precede all things. Faith is like a treasure because one can call on it when in need; it is also said to be like hands and feet because it is a means of getting what one wants. Hence the cultivation of faith is the beginning of the Mahayana path. In this context, we can divide faith into three levels: (1) clear faith, which consists of a clear appreciation of the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; (2) aspiring faith, which means that, having developed a clear appreciation of the qualities of the Triple Gem, one aspires to achieve these qualities for oneself; and (3) confident faith, which means that, once clear faith and aspiring faith have been firmly established, one's faith gradually becomes unshakable. Through these three levels of faith—from appreciation to aspiration to confident certainty—one's faith is developed to a point where its progress and effects are irreversible.

The cultivation of faith is combined with the taking of refuge. The path to enlightenment and Buddhahood is a long one, on which the obstacles are many and our own deficiencies numerous, so it is necessary to have a support, a stabilizing influence. This support is provided by the practice of taking refuge. Through the act of taking refuge, we acquire a guide, a path, and a community, all of which contribute to our progress on the path.

The cultivation of faith and taking of refuge are followed by contemplation of the precious nature of the human form, that is, of the rare circumstances of human birth and opportunity to practice the Dharma. Nagarjuna said that one who uses a jewel-adorned golden vessel for vomit and spittle is surely foolish; similarly foolish is one who uses the precious human form for the practice of unwholesome acts. If we consider the causes of human birth, the rarity of human birth, and the difficulty of securing a situation in which we are able to practice the Dharma, then surely, having secured all the opportune conditions, we must practice the Dharma quickly. To motivate ourselves to do so, and to take up all the practices that will eventually

culminate in the attainment of Buddhahood, we contemplate the rarity and precious nature of the human form and of conditions conducive to practice of the Dharma.

This contemplation is followed by meditation on death and impermanence. This meditation is an incentive to practice; it is also a key to understanding the ultimate truth. Just as the cultivation of faith and the taking of refuge complement each other, so contemplation of the precious nature of the human form and meditation on death and impermanence are complementary.

These contemplations are followed by careful consideration of the truth of the universality of suffering in the six realms, accompanied by contemplation of the law of karma.

The preliminary practices are meant to transform one's attitudes to such an extent that one is ready to begin practicing the Mahayana path. The result of the preliminary practices is twofold: (1) enthusiasm for an elevated and exalted goal, the goal of Buddhahood; and (2) disengagement from, or renunciation of, all attachment to the things of this life and to the cycle of samsara as a whole. At this point, as Shantideva said in his Introduction to the *Way of the Bodhisattva* (*Bodhicharyavatara),* one is ready to expel attachment to the world the same way one would cough up spittle.

The Mahayana path only begins when disengagement from the world has been achieved with conviction. This is why it is a mistake to regard the Mahayana as intrinsically more worldly than, say, the Theravada path. When renunciation has thus been achieved, we come to the beginning of the path per se, which is the awakening of the enlightenment thought praised by all Mahayana masters. In a way, as we shall see, this awakening of *bodhichitta* is also the end of the Mahayana path.

The enlightenment thought is awakened through cultivation of great love and great compassion. Great love and great compassion are the altruistic wish that all

sentient beings be happy and free from suffering. Love and compassion follow upon understanding the equality of all sentient beings. This awareness of the sameness of all that lives is the great universality of the Mahayana tradition and of Buddhism as a whole. Each and every living being is alike in wanting happiness and fearing suffering.

This awareness of the equality of all living beings is not only the foundation of Buddhist morality, it is also the foundation of great love and great compassion and of *bodhichitta,* the resolve to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all living beings. We cultivate great love and great compassion by contemplating the sameness of all sentient beings. We amplify and extend this feeling of love and compassion by considering the relationships that bind us to all that lives.

In this context, we should remember that at one time or another all sentient beings have been kind mothers to us. If we remember the kindness of our own mothers, then we must also remember the debt we owe them. Just as it would not be right to allow your mother to continue to suffer, so it is not right that all sentient beings, who have at some time or another been kind mothers to you, should continue to suffer in samsara. It is in this sense that the wish for all to be happy and free from suffering implies the wish to attain Buddhahood—because, despite our cultivation of the wish that all beings become happy and free from suffering, we are at present unable to do anything for them.

No one other than a fully enlightened Buddha can secure the goal of ultimate happiness and freedom from suffering for all beings. No matter how much we may try to do so, no matter how much great love and compassion we feel for living beings, unless and until we ourselves have achieved supreme and perfect enlightenment, we will not be able to secure the real happiness of living beings. Recognition of the sameness of all living beings; recognition of the debt we owe all

living beings who have at one time or another been our kind mothers; the consequent wish for all to be happy and free from suffering; and recognition of our present inability to do anything to achieve this goal—all these culminate in the awakening of the enlightenment thought, namely, the determination to attain Buddhahood for the sake of all living beings.

It is this moment of enlightenment consciousness which transforms a miserable wretch living in a prison into a son or daughter of the Buddha. This *bodhichitta,* or consciousness of enlightenment, is divided into two categories: (1) the relative, or conventional, enlightenment thought, and (2) the ultimate enlightenment consciousness. The conventional enlightenment thought is the determination or resolve to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all living beings. In the conventional enlightenment thought, we still perceive the dualities of subject and object, samsara and nirvana, ignorance and enlightenment. Because the resolve to attain Buddhahood is based on these dualistic conceptions, it is called "conventional." The ultimate enlightenment consciousness, which we can metaphorically term "the Buddha mind," is a state in which dualities no longer have any meaning.

Let us look a little more closely at the conventional enlightenment thought and at the means of transforming it into the ultimate enlightenment consciousness. The conventional enlightenment thought is itself divided into two categories: (a) the aspiring enlightenment thought, and (b) the applied enlightenment thought. The former is the mere wish or aspiration to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, and is analogous to the decision to travel to a distant country. The latter is the implementation of the means of achieving Buddhahood, and is analogous to actually making such a journey.

Specifically, the applied enlightenment thought entails practice of the Six Perfections of generosity, morality, patience, energy, meditation, and wisdom. It is

the practice of these perfections that transforms the mere determination to achieve enlightenment (or conventional enlightenment thought) into the Buddha mind (or ultimate enlightenment consciousness).

It is important to remember the special role of meditation and wisdom in the practice of the perfections. Mahayana masters from the great Nagarjuna in India to Hui Neng in China have stressed that there is no meditation without wisdom and no wisdom without meditation. This means that, for Buddhists, a concentrated mind without insight is an unproductive and inconsequential achievement. It is only when such a mind is coupled with wisdom that meditation is productive of real freedom. Similarly, without a concentrated mind, insight cannot be achieved.

Wisdom is the crown of the Six Perfections. It is the perfection of wisdom—the penetrative, direct understanding of emptiness—that transforms the practices of generosity, morality, patience, energy, and meditation into perfections. It makes them transcendental. Without the perfection of wisdom, there is no perfection of the other five practices. This is why it is said that the perfection of wisdom is like firing a clay jar, for left unfired, the "jar" of the other five perfections is easily shattered. Similarly, if a Bodhisattva does not practice the perfection of wisdom, he or she can be easily overcome. It is also said that the other five perfections are like blind men who will never reach their destination on their own, but who can do so with the help of a single sighted guide. Similarly, without the perfection of wisdom, the other five practices cannot lead to the goal of Buddhahood.

Why is the role of the perfection of wisdom unique among the Six Perfections? It is in the light of the perfection of wisdom that we see the emptiness of the subject, object, and action of the other five perfections. These are the three "pure circles" mentioned in Mahayana literature: the purity, or emptiness, of the subject, object, and action. In the perfection of generosity, for instance, it is the perfection of wisdom

that causes us to understand the emptiness of the giver (the subject of the action of giving), the emptiness of the recipient (the object of giving), and the emptiness of the gift.

Similarly, in the perfections of morality, patience, energy, and meditation, it is through understanding the perfection of wisdom that one understands the purity or emptiness of the subject, object, and action present in every sphere of action. In every practice, too, it is understanding the perfection of wisdom that enables one to act perfectly to achieve the perfection of generosity, the perfection of morality, and so forth. It is in this context that we need to appreciate the unique role of the perfection of wisdom.

We have arrived at the attainment of the ultimate enlightenment consciousness, or the enlightened mind of a Buddha, with its perfect understanding of emptiness. At this point we might wonder whether the Buddha mind has any room left for compassion, in light of its understanding the emptiness of the object of compassion (living beings), the subject of compassion (the practitioner), and the activity of compassion. The answer is that, at this point, the Buddha mind undergoes a spontaneous or voluntary association with suffering.

Let us look at an example that illustrates the compatibility of wisdom and compassion on the stage of enlightenment. Suppose you dream that you are trapped in a burning house. Naturally, you are distressed. Suppose, then, that you eventually awake and realize that the suffering you experienced in the dream was not real. Suppose, too, that on the following night you observe your roommate or partner thrashing about in bed, muttering "Fire! Fire!" or something similar. You know, in your awakened state, that your friend's fear and anxiety are groundless, and yet, to the person experiencing it in a dream, the suffering is real enough. Notwithstanding your knowledge of the emptiness of that suffering, your wisdom is automatically

accompanied by compassion, by the wish to relieve the suffering of your friend.

It is this reintegration with the world of illusion, this voluntary reassociation with fictitious suffering, that finds its expression in what are called "the four secondary perfections of the enlightened ones"—namely, skillful means, resolution, power, and knowledge: (1) the perfection of skillful means enables the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to implement countless devices for the liberation of living beings; (2) the perfection of resolution enables them to shape the particular forms of the activities they employ; (3) the perfection of power enables the enlightened ones to work spontaneously and effectively for the benefit of others; and (4) the perfection of knowledge provides them with all that knowledge of the conditions and attitudes of sentient beings which is necessary to effect their liberation.

The four secondary perfections may also be termed soteriological or altruistic perfections. They are the automatic and spontaneous fulfillment of the enlightened ones' intent to free all living beings. All these activities of the enlightenment consciousness expressing itself in skillful means, resolution, power, and knowledge are a spontaneous reflection of the enlightened state. It is said that, just as a wind chime spontaneously and appropriately gives forth the right sound in response to the currents of air that blow against it, so the enlightened ones respond spontaneously and appropriately to each and every current of karmic energy emanating from sentient beings with a kind of automatic, effortless activity aimed at the liberation of all.

The state of Buddhahood is the culmination of the practice of the six basic perfections. The practice of the Six Perfections results in the accomplishment of the two accumulations of merit and of knowledge. The perfections of generosity, morality, and patience result in the accumulation of merit, while those of meditation and wisdom result in the accumulation of knowledge; the perfection of energy is

necessary in both cases. These two accumulations result in the twofold being of Buddhahood—(a) the form dimension (*rupakaya*), and (b) the truth or transcendental dimension (*dharmakaya*).

The accumulation of merit through the practice of the perfections of generosity, morality, and patience is manifested in the form dimension. The accumulation of knowledge through the practice of the perfections of meditation and wisdom is manifested in the truth dimension. We can therefore see, in the practice of the Six Perfections, the causes or seeds of the being of a Buddha. In the practice of the six basic perfections, we can see the seeds of the Buddhas' two-dimensional being as form and truth. In the practice of the four secondary perfections, we can see the seeds of the Buddhas' activities directed toward the liberation of all sentient beings.

This twofold division of Buddhahood in terms of the form and truth dimensions is congruent with the classification of the three bodies (or dimensions) of Buddhahood: the terrestrial, celestial, and transcendental. The form dimension can be divided into (i) the terrestrial body, and (ii) the celestial body, but the truth or transcendental dimension has no division at all since it is inconceivable, inexpressible, and beyond name and form of any kind. The form dimension, however, takes innumerable names and forms. We can call the terrestrial body (or dimension) the earthly manifestation of Buddhahood because it is accessible to all of us all the time, regardless of our state of spiritual development. In contrast, the celestial or exalted dimension is manifested only to the spiritually advanced.

These three bodies or dimensions of Buddhahood operate together to effect the liberation of sentient beings according to their natures and capacities. The terrestrial dimension manifests especially in the appearance of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, and also in the appearance of enlightened living beings (spiritual friends) and inanimate things. The celestial dimension manifests itself in the

appearance of the heavenly Buddhas, like Amitabha and Akshobhya, and in the exalted Bodhisattvas, like Avalokiteshvara and Manjushri.

This three-dimensional nature of Buddhahood reflects the unity of samsara and nirvana, of enlightenment and ignorance, of a pure vision of the universe and an impure vision of it. It also reflects the complete and total freedom of a Buddha. It reflects his or her freedom from the cycle of birth and death, and freedom to exercise his or her enlightening influence in countless, inconceivable ways for the liberation of all sentient beings. This is the greatness of the Mahayana conception of Buddhahood, the greatness of the goal of the Mahayana path.

Part Three

The Vajrayana

Chapter Twenty-Two
The Origins of the Vajrayana Tradition

Let us begin by looking at the Vajrayana tradition briefly in the context of the Mahayana. The Mahayana tradition is divided into two paths, the practice of the perfections (Paramitayana) and the practice of the Vajrayana (Mantrayana). The Vajrayana is a part of the Mahayana tradition. There is no distinction between the two in terms of their starting point (the experience of suffering) and their goal (Buddhahood). The only difference is in methodology: whereas accomplishment of the path of the perfections requires three eons, the methods of the Vajrayana enable one to accelerate development and thereby progress more rapidly along the path.

There are three names by which the Vajrayana tradition is best known: Vajrayana, Mantrayana, and Tantrayana. Vajrayana is the way of the adamant, or diamond. *Vajra* means diamond, the substance more durable than any other. The vajra is also the thunderbolt or scepter wielded by Indra, the king of the Brahmanical gods. The vajra is therefore a symbol of indestructibility and also of mastery over the universe.

A mantra is a short formula that generally has three purposes. First, it is used as an aid to concentration. Just as one can use one's breath, an image of the Buddha, a blue flower, or an idea as an object on which to concentrate one's mind, so one can use the sound of a mantra. Second, it is an aid to memory. When one recites the mantra, *Om mani padme hum*, for example, one remembers not only the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara but also skillful means and wisdom, and the necessity of uniting

them. Third, a mantra has the power to enhance one's spiritual development, in that the repeated use of mantras by meditation masters over many centuries has charged these mantras with a particular potency. The word *mantra* is composed of two parts: *man* comes from the term *manas,* which means "mind," and *tra* from *tranam,* "to protect." *Mantra* therefore means "something that protects the mind." In general, it also means the esoteric or secret vehicle.

Tantra means the extension or continuity of knowledge. Literally, *tantra* is derived from the continuity of a thread in a fabric; by implication, it means following the thread of knowledge continuously and thus extending it to encompass all knowledge.

A distinction can be drawn between the literature of the Vajrayana and the literature of the Mahayana proper. Just as the Mahayana tradition is composed of the Paramitayana and Vajrayana, so Mahayana literature is composed of the sutras and tantras. Both the sutras and tantras are believed to have been spoken by the Buddha, and they form the canonical literature of the Mahayana and Vajrayana, respectively. There are a large number of tantras; some of the more important ones are the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* (*The Collection of the Hidden or Secret Meaning*), the *Hevajra Tantra* (*The Tantra of Adamantine Bliss*), and the *Kalachakra Tantra* (*The Tantra of the Wheel of Time*). In addition to the tantras, the Vajrayana tradition recognizes a large amount of commentarial literature attributed to Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti, and also to the eighty-four men of great attainment, or *Mahasiddhas.*

Let us spend a moment on the origins of the tantras, since it is often asked whether they were indeed taught by the Buddha. From the very beginning of the Buddhist tradition, it was common for the Buddha to give teachings in all kinds of unusual circumstances. Sometimes he taught in response to the request of a god or another supra-human being, and even the Abhidharma is believed to have been

taught by the Buddha to his mother after her death, when she was residing in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three. In the Mahayana tradition, it is generally accepted that Mahayana masters can receive instruction through extraordinary means. For example, the fundamental texts of the Mind Only school are said to have been taught to Asanga by the future Buddha Maitreya (see Chapter 19).

The tantras are said to have been transmitted in a similar way. The tantras are not unreasonable if we examine them carefully. They do not contradict the meaning of other Buddhist scriptures, as will become apparent in the chapters that follow. If the Buddha did not teach the tantras at once to everyone, surely it was because not everyone is able to appreciate their true significance. In the light of these considerations, there is no reasonable doubt that the Vajrayana literature is authentic.

The Vajrayana arose as a result of the evolution of three currents of thought—currents that were already present even in the Buddha's own day. These were (1) the democratic current, (2) the magical or ritual current, and (3) the symbolic current. The democratic current sought to avail lay people of the highest fruits of religious life, such as enlightenment. An example of the democratic current at work in the early period of the Buddhist tradition is the attainment of Arhatship by the Buddha's father, Shuddhodana while still a layman. In the Mahayana tradition, this current was accelerated and amplified, so that the figure of the householder Bodhisattva became the norm.

Examples of the magical or ritual current occur in accounts in the Pali canon. We find the Buddha pronouncing formulas of protection against snakebite and the perils of childbirth. There is also an account of the Buddha's conversion of a queen, Kshema, in which the Buddha creates the vision of a lovely maiden who, as Kshema watches, becomes old and decrepit in a matter of moments. In this case the Buddha used extraordinary powers to create an apparition that would teach the truth of

impermanence. This happens with great frequency in Mahayana literature, where we find the Buddha assuming various forms in order to teach. In the Mahayana, too, there is an increasing use of *dharanis* (verbal formulas that are precursors of mantras), as well as the continuation of various rituals of the early Buddhist period, particularly ordination rituals like the removal of the hair and donning of yellow robes.

The use of symbols was also present in the Buddhist tradition from the earliest period. For example, the symbol of the wheel was used to indicate the Dharma, and the symbol of the lute was used to explain the Middle Way. In the Mahayana, this use of symbols continued to play an important role. In these three currents of thought and action—the democratic, magic or ritual, and symbolic—we have the main streams that contributed to the growth of the Vajrayana tradition.

The phenomenon that we now identify as the Vajrayana tradition originated in India between the third and seventh century C.E. By the seventh century, the Vajrayana was flourishing throughout India. Nagarjuna and Asanga played a major role in its growth at the outset; later, the Vajrayana tradition was greatly influenced by the eighty-four Mahasiddhas. You may be surprised to find the names of Nagarjuna and Asanga occurring in this context, but the Vajrayana tradition is unanimous in calling them its founders. We will understand why this is true from the conceptual point of view when we examine the philosophical and religious background of the Vajrayana in Chapter 23. For now, let us look at the traditional biographies of Nagarjuna and Asanga, which will help us understand the environment in which the Vajrayana originated and developed.

According to the traditional Tibetan biographies of Nagarjuna, it was predicted that he would not survive beyond the age of seven. The biographies tell us that, when the boy's seventh birthday drew near, his parents, unwilling to watch him die,

sent him away with companions and provisions on an extended journey. The accounts say that Nagarjuna proceeded north and eventually reached Nalanda University. There Nagarjuna met an adept professor by the name of Saraha. When Saraha heard of Nagarjuna's predicted early demise, he counseled him to recite the mantra of Aparamitayus, the Buddha of Limitless Life. After reciting the mantra throughout the night of his seventh birthday, Nagarjuna escaped the death that had been predicted for him.

Whether or not we want to credit this account as history, we can learn something rather important about the climate in which it was accepted as biography—namely, that it was one in which mantras were believed to have the power to influence reality.

In the biographies of Nagarjuna we also learn that, during a famine, he sustained his colleagues in the monastery by transforming ordinary, base objects into gold. Here we have an example of the symbolism of alchemy. This symbolism became important in the Vajrayana tradition because just as the alchemist transforms base objects into gold, so the Vajrayana adept transforms the impure and defiled experience of ordinary human beings into the experience of enlightenment.

If we look at the biographies of Asanga, we find very revealing stories there as well. According to these texts, Asanga retired to a cave to meditate on the future Buddha Maitreya, practicing for three years without success. Discouraged, he left the cave at the end of the third year and almost immediately came upon a man rubbing a piece of iron with a feather. When Asanga asked him what he was doing, the man said he was making a needle. Asanga thought that if people had such patience even in worldly tasks, perhaps he had been too hasty in abandoning his practice, so he returned to the cave and continued with his meditation.

Asanga meditated for twelve years in all without having any direct experience of

Maitreya. At the end of the twelfth year, he once again left the cave. This time he came upon a dog lying ill by the side of the path, his body covered with festering wounds in which maggots were feeding. Having meditated on Maitreya for twelve years and thereby having developed great compassion, Asanga immediately wished to ease the suffering of the dog. He thought of removing the maggots but reflected that if he were to use his fingers, he would injure them. In order not to injure the maggots and yet relieve the dog, he bent down to remove the maggots with his tongue. The moment he did so, the dog disappeared into a burst of rainbow-colored light and the Bodhisattva Maitreya appeared before him.

Asanga asked, "Where have you been all these years?" to which Maitreya replied, "I have been with you all along—it is just that you were not able to see me. Only when you had developed your compassion and purified your mind sufficiently were you able to see me." To demonstrate the truth of this, he asked Asanga to take him on his shoulders and walk through the village. Nobody saw anything on Asanga's shoulders except for one old woman, who asked him, "What are you doing carrying that sick dog?"

Thus, in the biographies of Asanga, we find another important truth: that whatever we experience—the whole of reality—depends on the condition of our minds.

In the biographies of these two founding fathers, we can see various elements that are important to the Vajrayana tradition: the magical or ritual element, the alchemical element, and the element of the apparitional, or mind-dependent, nature of reality.

While Nagarjuna and Asanga are credited with being the founding fathers of Vajrayana, the eighty-four men of great attainment, or Mahasiddhas, undoubtedly performed the work of disseminating the Vajrayana throughout India. These men

were examples of a new kind of religious personality. Not necessarily monks of orthodox Buddhism or priests of the old Brahmanism, these figures who played principal roles in the spread of Vajryana were laymen, naked ascetics, boatmen, potters, and kings. If we look at the accounts of these new heroes' lives and times, we will appreciate the spiritual climate that existed in India during the rise of the Vajrayana tradition. Let us look at the biographies of two of these Mahasiddhas, Virupa and Naropa.

Virupa is responsible for the origin and transmission of many important Vajrayana teachings. He was a professor at Nalanda University, where he taught philosophy all day and practiced Vajrayana all night. He practiced for years and recited thousands of mantras without success. Finally, he got fed up and threw his rosary into a latrine. The next night, while Virupa was sleeping, a vision of Nairatmya, a goddess of insubstantiality, appeared before him and told him that he had been reciting the mantra of the wrong deity. The next day Virupa retrieved his rosary from the latrine and went back to the Vajrayana, reciting and practicing the meditation on the Goddess Nairatmya. He achieved success in his practice and left his professorial post, wandering as a naked yogi throughout India.

Three important things are said of Virupa: he is said to have stopped the flow of the Ganges River so that he might cross it; to have drunk wine for three days nonstop in a wine shop; and to have held the sun immobile in the sky all the while. What do these feats mean? Stopping the flow of the Ganges means stopping the river of the afflictions, breaking the cycle of birth and death. Drinking wine for three days means enjoying the supreme bliss of emancipation. Holding the sun immobile in the sky means holding the light of the mind in the sky of omniscience.

In the biographies of Virupa, we have an indication of the premium that the Vajrayana places on experiential or direct knowledge. Virupa was a professor at

Nalanda University, but that was not enough. In addition to the knowledge he acquired through study, he had to acquire direct, immediate knowledge in order to realize the truth for himself.

The same theme is evident in the biography of Naropa, who was also a professor at Nalanda. One day, while he was sitting in his cell surrounded by his books, an old woman appeared and asked him whether he understood the letter of the teaching contained in all his books. Naropa replied that he did. The woman was very pleased and then asked whether he understood the spirit of the teaching as well. Naropa thought that since she had been so pleased with his earlier answer, he would reply that he also understood the spirit of the teaching contained in the books. But the old woman then became angry, and said that although the first time he had told the truth, the second time he had lied. The old woman was Vajravarahi, another goddess of insubstantiality. As a consequence of the disclosure that he did not understand the spirit of what he had read, Naropa, too, left his professorial post and went forth as a seeker of the truth.

Let us conclude by looking at a few ideas from verses that are attributed to the Mahasiddhas. In these verses we see the new type of religious personality that they exemplified. We also see the use of various symbols to convey the importance of the transcendence of duality.

The first verse is as follows:

Dombi,(the name of an outcast woman) your hut lies outside the village. You are touched by the bald-headed and by the caste-conscious Brahmin. I am a naked Kapalika, an ascetic who wears a garland of skulls. I have no prejudices. I will take you for my maid.

Here "Dombi" is a symbol of Nairatmya, a goddess of insubstantiality. "Your hut lies outside the village" means that, in order to really understand emptiness, one has to transcend conventional limitations. The rest of the verse means that, although emptiness may be touched by monks and Brahmins, only the yogi—the new type of religious figure who has no prejudices—can make emptiness his maid, that is, identify with emptiness.

A second example runs:

The wine woman brews her wine. The wine drinker sees the sign on the tenth door of the wine shop, and enters.

Here "the wine woman" is a symbol of Nairatmya. "Wine" is the wine of nonduality, of going beyond this and that. "The sign on the tenth door" means the tenth stage of the Bodhisattva path, the threshold of Buddhahood. Thus the verse means that the wine drinker enters the door of Buddhahood through abiding in nonduality.

With the increasing popularity of magic, ritual, and symbolism, and the gathering strength of the democratic currents that promised the highest fruits of religion to all types of persons, the Vajrayana became exceedingly widespread throughout India within the space of a few centuries.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE
Philosophical and Religious Foundations

It is important to examine the philosophical and religious foundations of the Vajrayana so as to better understand how it fits into the Buddhist tradition as a whole. As we look at the Vajrayana tradition in more detail, we will find that it incorporates a number of important Mahayana ideas. Three religious and philosophical ideas that are prevalent in the Mahayana play a vital role in the Vajrayana as well. These are the ideas of (1) emptiness, (2) Mind Only, and (3) expedient or skillful means.

In Chapter 22, I had occasion to refer to the fact that the Tibetan tradition regards Nagarjuna and Asanga as the founders of the Vajrayana path. In addition to the Vajrayana elements contained in their biographies, as discussed in Chapter 22, there is an equally significant way Nagarjuna and Asanga can be considered Vajrayana's founding fathers—namely, because of their advocacy and explanation of the ideas of emptiness and the primacy of consciousness (or Mind Only). A number of Vajrayana works in the Tibetan canon are attributed to Nagarjuna and Asanga, though this attribution is disputed by modern scholars. Whether or not Nagarjuna and Asanga actually wrote specifically Vajrayana works, it is quite clear that, without the ideas they put forward, the Vajrayana would be unintelligible, and very likely impossible as well.

Let us look first at the idea of emptiness, which is so characteristic of the writings of Nagarjuna. In Chapter 22, I referred to a situation in which Nagarjuna is

said to have transformed base objects into gold. This can be seen as a metaphor for the main project with which the Vajrayana is concerned: transforming common experience into the experience of enlightenment. If we look at this analogy of alchemy, we see that, for transformation to be possible, the base object cannot have any real, permanent nature of its own. For instance, if a piece of coal were to have an unchanging, intrinsic nature, it could never be changed into anything else. Yet we know that a piece of coal can, under certain conditions, become a diamond.

The idea of an unchanging, independent character is expressed in Sanskrit by the term *svabhava*, which means "own-being" or "self-existence." The absence of own-being is *nihsvabhava*, which is synonymous with emptiness. Emptiness is, of course, not nothingness. It is, rather, a kind of openness, a situation in which phenomena exist dependent on causes and conditions.

Although this idea of emptiness is most commonly associated with Nagarjuna and the Middle Way school, like the other important doctrines of the Mahayana, it also exists in the Theravada tradition. For example, according to the Theravada canon, the Buddha likened all phenomena to the flame of an oil lamp, which exists dependent on the oil and the wick. The flame is nothing in itself. Similarly, all phenomena depend on causes and conditions.

In the Mahayana, where this idea is elaborated at great length, all phenomena are likened to a magical illusion. An illusory elephant, for example, appears dependent on some basis, like a hill of earth or a piece of wood, and is brought into being by a magician using certain magical spells and so forth. Thus illusory appearances come about dependent on certain causes and conditions. Similarly, all phenomena exist dependent on certain causes and conditions. It is because of this dependence, this emptiness, that transformation is possible.

Nagarjuna says that if there were any own-being, transformation by means of

the path of liberation would be impossible. In other words, if that lump of coal we referred to a moment ago had an unchangeable nature, it could never become a diamond. Similarly, if each and every one of us had an own-being or permanent existence as ordinary, afflicted sentient beings—if this were our identity—then no matter how much we practiced the Dharma, we could never become enlightened. It is because we are subject to the afflictions (ignorance, attachment, and aversion) that we have the nature of ordinary sentient beings. But if we replace ignorance with wisdom, attachment with lack of attachment, and aversion with love and compassion, we can change these conditions. By changing these conditions, we can change the nature of our being and become Buddhas. Emptiness is therefore absolutely necessary to allow for transformation from the condition of samsara to the liberation of nirvana.

Let us look now at the second idea, that of the role of the mind in experience. Here Asanga and his younger brother Vasubandhu made two general points: (a) that objects have no stable or fixed form of appearance, and (b) that objects appear even without an external stimulus.

Like other major tenets of the Mahayana and Vajrayana, these two points are not absent from the Theravada tradition. The first is evident in a number of Buddhist texts. For example, the incident involving the Elder Tissa is well known within Theravada circles: when asked whether he had seen a woman on the road, Tissa replied that he did not know whether it was a man or a woman, but only that he had seen a heap of bones going up the road. This shows that objects have no stable or fixed form of appearance; what appears as an attractive woman to one man appears as a heap of bones to another.

The Mahayana tradition elaborates on this by recourse to the experience of a number of altered states of consciousness. For example, one feels the earth move, or

that one has enormous power, when one has imbibed too much alcohol. Similarly, under the influence of psychedelic substances, one's perception of objects is different. In his *Twenty Verses on Cognition Only,* Vasubandhu illustrates this with reference to the experience of the beings of the six realms (see also Chapter 19). There, he spells out the diverse ways objects appear depending on the subjective conditions of the perceiver, concluding that objects appear in different shapes and forms to different sentient beings according to their karmic condition.

The second point, that objects appear even without an external stimulus, is also found in the early Theravada tradition. For example, in Buddhaghosha's explanation of the three stages of concentration (preliminary, proximate, and accomplished), the image of meditation becomes internalized at the proximate stage. If a meditator uses, say, a blue disk at the first stage, at the second stage that disk becomes internalized and he now meditates on a mental replica of it. Consequently, whereas on the first stage he uses a physical object as his object of meditation, on the second stage of concentration he no longer needs that external support. The object now appears to him without the need of an external stimulus. We can also see this in dreams, where the dreamer experiences objects without any external stimuli.

Vasubandhu adds to this the case of the wardens of the hell realms. If these wardens were reborn in the hells because of their own karma, they, too, would experience the sufferings there. But since wardens are in the hells simply to torment hell beings, Vasubandhu suggests that they are mere creations of the minds of the hell beings themselves. In other words, because of their unwholesome karma, hell beings project images of wardens who then proceed to torment them.

In all these cases—the experiences of meditation, of dreaming, and of hell beings—objects appear without any external stimulus. This is why it is said that, just as a painter might paint a portrait of the demon and then be terrified by it, so

unenlightened beings paint a picture of the six realms of samsara and then are tormented and terrified by that picture. Through the power of our minds, we create the six realms of existence and then circle in them endlessly. We are able to create these six realms precisely because there is no own-being.

These first two ideas—the idea of emptiness and the idea of the role of the mind in creating experience—go together. Objects have no independent existence. Their existence is relative to causes and conditions—most importantly, the mental causes and conditions of ignorance, attachment, aversion, greed, anger, jealousy, and the like. Because of these mental conditions, and because of the fact that phenomena are empty, the mind constructs and creates experience in a particular form, in the form of the suffering of the six realms.

Just as the mind can work unconsciously and automatically to create the experience of suffering in the six realms, so the mind can be made to work deliberately and consciously to bring about a change in that experience, to bring about the experience of liberation. This is quite clear in the example of the experience of meditation that we considered a moment ago. Ordinarily, the mind functions unconsciously and automatically to create experience. We respond to an object, such as the form of a woman, because of our habitual conditioning, because we are subject to desire and ignorance. In meditation we train the mind to function in a chosen, decisive way to change our experience. Through the experience of meditation, we can change our perception of the object in the same way the Elder Tissa changed his perception so that he was able to see the form of a woman as only a heap of bones.

Again, we ordinarily perceive different colors automatically, in an undirected and unspecified way. Through meditation, we can alter that situation so that we can, at will, visualize and create a particular patch of color within our mental experience. The idea of emptiness and the idea of the creative power of the mind are clearly

present in the structure of the Vajrayana techniques of meditation, which we will be looking at in greater detail in Chapter 29. Emptiness and the creative power of the mind together give us the ability and the methodology needed to transform our experience. We can transform our experience because nothing has any nature of its own, and the way we transform it is through using the power of our minds to create and determine the way we experience objects.

As mentioned in Chapter 22, the Vajrayana is one with the Mahayana both in its starting point and in its goal. The fundamental idea in the Mahayana tradition is the enlightenment thought or mind (*bodhichitta,* the resolve to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings), and the fruit of this resolve is the attainment of Buddhahood, with its transcendental dimension and its phenomenal dimension. The phenomenal dimension is an expression of the Buddha's great compassion, which manifests itself in skillful means—the third idea prevalent in the Mahayana and crucial to the Vajrayana as well.

Skillful means is the ability to reach all sentient beings at their own levels. In many Mahayana sutras, this is explained with the help of analogies, such as the parable of the three carts and that of rainfall and the light of the sun and moon in the *Lotus Sutra* (see Chapter 15) The phenomenal dimension of the Buddha appears to all sentient beings according to their particular needs and abilities. It manifests itself in a variety of forms, such as that of the beautiful maiden whom the Buddha caused to appear for the sake of Kshema (see Chapter 22). In many Mahayana discourses and treatises, the Buddha manifests himself in the form of ordinary people or gods in order to assist sentient beings along the path to liberation.

It is in this way, too, that the Buddha manifests himself in the special forms of the deities of the Vajrayana pantheon according to the needs and propensities of sentient beings. For example, in the case of the five celestial Buddhas, the Buddha

manifests himself in five special forms that correspond to the particular karmic propensities of sentient beings. Thus he manifests as the Buddha Vairochana especially for sentient beings whose primary affliction is ignorance, while it is Akshobhya who appears to those whose primary affliction is ill-will and Amitabha to those whose primary affliction is attachment. The Buddha manifests himself in these different forms to best assist different sentient beings with particular karmic problems.

These manifestations of the Buddha interact with sentient beings to bring about their liberation. There is a kind of interdependence between the manifestations of the Buddha (in the forms of the Heavenly Buddhas and of deities of the Vajrayana pantheon) and the development of sentient beings through the practice of meditation. To illustrate this, let me return to the story of Asanga and the future Buddha Maitreya. Asanga meditated for twelve years before he was able to perceive Maitreya. Maitreya was with him all along, but Asanga had to develop his vision so that he was in a position to experience Maitreya directly. In the same way, the manifestations of the Buddha are around us all the time, but to perceive them directly we must develop our minds through meditation, through the careful purification of our beings. This purification of the mind may be likened to the process of tuning a television set to receive a particular transmission. The transmission is there all along, but unless and until the receiver is tuned to the correct frequency to receive it, the picture cannot be seen.

If we remember these three principles—the principle of emptiness, the principle of the power of the mind to determine the nature of our experience, and the principle of skillful means, we will be able to understand how the Vajrayana path can work. We will also be able to understand the diversity of the forms and images that the Vajrayana uses to expedite the process of transformation.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR
Methodology

As noted in Chapters 22 and 23, the Vajrayana and the Mahayana are identical in their views of the beginning and end of the path. Where the two differ is in methodology. The special claim of the Vajrayana is that it provides a more skillful and rapid means of getting from that beginning (the initial situation of suffering) to the end (the goal of Buddhahood). Therefore a look at its methodology is particularly important to an understanding of the Vajrayana.

Let us begin by discussing the mechanism of the initial situation of suffering. The fundamental cause of suffering has traditionally been called ignorance. But ignorance means the dichotomy or duality between subject and object, between self and other. There are different ways to deconstruct or dismantle this duality which is the substance of ignorance. In the Abhidharma literature (see Chapter 19), the emphasis is on the dismantling of the self. By taking apart the self—one pole of the duality— the subject is dismantled. And ultimately, dismantling the subject implies dismantling the object, too. This is why great emphasis is placed on the analytical dissection of the self. This has been the main thrust of the Abhidharmic tradition, although not its exclusive contents, since the *Abhidharma Pitaka* also contains the important *Book of Causal Relations* (*Patthana*), in which the object as well as the subject is dismantled.

In the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, there is a slightly different approach, in that these traditions begin by attacking the object in various ways. For instance, in

Chapter 23 we discovered that the object is not stable in its mode of appearance, and that an object can appear even without any external stimulus. Thus the object is like an object seen in a dream; it is unreal.

The discovery that the object is unreal raises the question of the status of the self, or subject. In the Mahayana and Vajrayana, the general procedure for deconstructing the subject-object or self-and-other duality follows these lines: We begin by showing that the object is dreamlike and unreal, and then apply our understanding of interdependence to reveal that, if the object is unreal, then the subject which is dependent on the object is also dreamlike and unreal. If the seed is unreal, the sprout, too, must be unreal. This brings us to the understanding of the emptiness of subject and object. This process is reflected to an extent in the attitudes of the two main Mahayana schools—the Mind Only school, which focuses on the dreamlike nature of experience, and the Middle Way school, which focuses on the idea of interdependence.

In addition to this fundamental duality—the subject-object or self-other duality—there are many others that must be removed if we are going to achieve enlightenment. The other major duality which produces suffering, and on which the Mahayana and the Vajrayana focus, is the duality between samsara and nirvana. In general, this is a duality between what is conditioned and what is unconditioned. Samsara is conditioned and nirvana is unconditioned. This is reflected in the technical description of the phenomena of samsara as conditioned phenomena and nirvana as unconditioned reality. Samsara is conditioned because it is characterized by origination and destruction, by birth and death, whereas nirvana is unconditioned because it is characterized by non-origination and non-destruction.

But is this duality real or is it merely constructed? The position of the Mahayana and Vajrayana is that the duality between samsara and nirvana is unreal. It is merely

constructed by, and hence an illusion of, the mind. This is shown by an analysis of the characteristics of samsara—that is, by an analysis of origination and destruction.

There are various ways origination and destruction are examined within the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. One is found in Nagarjuna's extensive examination of origination in his *Foundation Stanzas of the Middle Way* (*Mulamadhyamakakarika.*). There he considers the four possibilities of origination: (i) from self, (ii) from other, (iii) from both, and (iv) without a cause (see Chapter 18). But here we can content ourselves with an analogical examination of origination, in which it is said that if objects are like objects seen in a dream, then there is neither any real origination nor any real destruction.

In the *Samadhiraja Sutra,* it is mentioned that if a young, virgin woman has a dream in which she gives birth to a child, and in that same dream she sees that the child dies, she will (of course) experience first happiness and then sorrow in the dream. But when she awakes she will realize that there was no real birth or death of a child. Similarly, all phenomena have no real origination and no real destruction. If, in reality, all things have no origination and no destruction, then the characteristics of samsara no longer hold good as real characteristics. The distinction between samsara and nirvana collapses, and we are left with the conclusion that, as Nagarjuna puts it in the *Mulamadhyamakakarika,* there is not even the subtlest difference between samsara and nirvana. If there is no origination and no destruction, then samsara's characteristics are the same as nirvana's, since nirvana is characterized by the absence of origination and destruction. There is, therefore, no difference between samsara and nirvana.

To summarize, we arrive at the identity of samsara and nirvana first through a dismantling of our conception of samsara. We define samsara as conditioned. We say that the characteristics of the conditioned are origination and destruction, but find

that there is no real origination and no real destruction. If samsara does not have these characteristics, then its opposite, nirvana, has no meaning. In this way we arrive at the identity of samsara and nirvana.

Everything I have said thus far about ignorance being the fundamental cause of suffering, about the duality of subject and object and of samsara and nirvana, and about the emptiness of each pole of these dualities—all this holds true for the Mahayana as well as for the Vajrayana tradition. There is complete agreement between the two up to this point. There is also complete agreement about the distinction between indirect knowledge and direct knowledge.

The distinction between understanding the truth intellectually and seeing the truth directly is, of course, recognized throughout the Buddhist tradition. For example, in the Theravada tradition, there is recognition of the difference between understanding the Four Noble Truths intellectually and seeing them directly. In the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, the crux of the matter is whether our knowledge of the identity of samsara and nirvana is intellectual or direct and experiential.

If we follow the procedures laid down in the Perfection of Wisdom literature—the arguments spelled out by Nagarjuna, Asanga, and Vasubandhu—we arrive at an intellectual, indirect understanding of the non-differentiation of subject and object, samsara and nirvana. It is with the quicker, more skillful methods by which indirect intellectual understanding is turned into direct and transforming understanding that Vajrayana methodology comes into play.

The key to an understanding of Vajrayana methodology per se is an understanding of the emptiness of all things. All phenomena (*dharmas*) are nothing in themselves. They are what they are insofar as they are conceived of by the mind. Let me refer to two examples from the Theravada tradition to illustrate this point of the emptiness, or neutrality, of all phenomena. In the *Discourse of the Water Snake,*

Alagaddupama Sutta, the Buddha likens all phenomena to a water-snake and to a raft. He says that someone who is skilled at handling a water-snake can capture and handle it without coming to grief, but someone who is not skilled will come to grief if he tries to capture one. He also says that phenomena are like a raft, in that we do not need to hold onto them, just as we do not need to hold onto a raft once we have crossed a river.

The Buddha's discourse expresses very brilliantly and succinctly the emptiness and neutrality of phenomena. All phenomena are neither this nor that. They are neutral, dependent on how we take or use them. It is not in the nature of a water-snake to cause grief; rather, grief depends on the manner in which the water-snake is caught. Similarly, a knife is neither true nor false, but one who grasps it by the blade is surely in error. If we grasp a knife by its blade, we hurt ourselves, but if we grasp it by the handle, we are able to use it. If we use a raft to cross a river, we are using it properly; if we carry the raft on our shoulders after crossing the river, we are making a mistake. The usefulness or lack of usefulness of phenomena lies not in phenomena themselves but in the way we use them.

This is true not only of objects but also of mental states like desire and aversion. For example, there is the story of the Buddha's instruction to his cousin Nanda, who was persuaded to join the Order on the day he was to have married. After his ordination, Nanda began to miss his fiancée and regret that he had entered the Order. The Buddha was aware of Nanda's state of mind, so he took him on a trip to the heavens to show him the lovely, heavenly damsels there. Nanda was so infatuated by the maidens in the heavens that, when he was asked how they compared to his fiancée, he replied that, beside them, his fiancée looked like the skeleton of a female monkey. The Buddha advised Nanda that if he wanted to enjoy the heavenly damsels in his next life, the best way to do so was to remain in the

Buddhist Order and practice the Dharma.

Nanda went back to the Order with renewed zeal. When the other monks found out why Nanda was practicing so diligently, they teased him. Eventually Nanda realized the hollowness of his motivation and became an Arhat known as the foremost of those who are able to control their senses. This is an example of the neutrality of the mental state of desire. At a particular point in Nanda's progress, the Buddha used desire as a motivation to get Nanda to settle down and practice diligently.

Thus we can see that not only are objects like water-snakes, rafts, and knives neutral and dependent on how we take or use them, but mental states, also, are nothing in themselves: they depend on how we use them, whether for spiritual progress or spiritual retardation. This is why the Buddha said that "killing anger benefits the killer." Aversion is neither good nor bad. If one is averse to unwholesome actions, this is conducive to the goal of liberation, but if one is averse to wholesome actions, this is not conducive to good.

To reiterate, all phenomena are basically neutral or empty. How they affect our progress depends on how we take them and what we do with them. This is the insight or attitude which has been developed in the Vajrayana and which has enabled the Vajrayana to use particular methods that utilize all phenomena for spiritual progress. This is the key to the acceleration that Vajrayana methods bring to spiritual progress.

To the extent that we use only part of our experience to make progress toward the goal of liberation, our progress is, inevitably, slower. For example, how much time do any of us spend in meditation or in recitation? Most of our time is spent instead on eating, sleeping, or chatting with our friends. We are wasting all that time, and all that experience is not being used to make progress toward the goal of

enlightenment. It is here that the Vajrayana makes use of the idea of the basic neutrality of all phenomena, for if all phenomena are empty, why not make use of them—all sights, sounds, and mental states—for spiritual progress?

This is why the Vajrayana is said to regard all sights, sounds, and mental states as deities, mantras, and the transcendental dimension of Buddhahood. Everything that we see, hear, and think is really neutral and empty. If we take these sights, sounds, and thoughts to be manifestations of the pure vision of enlightenment, we can utilize these elements of experience to contribute to our progress toward enlightenment. I will explain this in greater detail in the chapters that follow, but let me give you an example at this point. The cup that I am holding belongs to the aggregate of form, which is a manifestation of the celestial Buddha Vairochana. The object, which belongs to the aggregate of form, is therefore not simply a cup but a dimension of the Buddha Vairochana. This is what is meant when it is said in the Vajrayana that one regards all sights as the deities, as the particular manifestations of a purified reality. By a particular act of the mind, we can similarly regard all sounds as mantras and all mental states as the transcendental dimension of Buddhahood.

This careful utilization of sights, sounds, and mental states is especially evident in the form of the Vajrayana ritual of meditation. In this context the Vajrayana practice of meditation may be likened to a raft—a raft that is composed of sights, sounds, and mental states. In the Vajrayana ritual, for example, there is a visual component, which is the visualization of any one of the deities of the pantheon; an auditory component, which is the recitation of the mantra; and a mental component, which is the identification of the meditator with the object of meditation and the cultivation of the understanding of nonduality and emptiness.

This will become clearer in later chapters. For the time being, I would like to conclude by observing that the ritual of Vajrayana meditation practice employs these

three components—visual, auditory, and mental—in order to create a "raft of ritual" that utilizes a variety of phenomena, and that this provides a particularly efficient form of meditation.

Those of you who practice breathing meditation or other forms of meditation will appreciate the truth of this. If you are trying to meditate only on your breath, there may be a point at which your mind becomes tired of trying to concentrate only on the breath and begins to wander. If you are chanting, your mind may become tired of the words of the chant. If you are doing insight meditation, your mind may become tired of the penetrative analysis of phenomena. Because of the multifaceted character of Vajrayana meditation practice, when the mind becomes tired and irritated and is no longer able to concentrate on the visualized form of the deity, it can concentrate on the mantra; when it becomes tired of concentrating on the mantra, it can concentrate on emptiness; and when it becomes tired of that, it can go back to the visualized form of the deity.

Indeed, Vajrayana ritual is more effective as a means of meditation precisely because of its multidimensional character: rather than setting up a confrontation with the tendency of the mind to become distracted, it utilizes that tendency. Thus Vajrayana meditation actually lets the mind wander, although it is only allowed to wander within a particular compass of religious or spiritual meaning, so that no matter what the mind rests on—whether the visualized form of the deity, the mantra, the identification of the meditator with the form of the deity, or even the emptiness of that form—it is resting on something that has spiritual power.

The Vajrayana ritual is also like a raft in the sense that it is not anything to be grasped. It is a means, or method, and nothing more. This ritual is also not supposed to be confined to sessions of formal meditation but to be extended to all our activities, both within and outside of meditation sessions. While in the meditation session, we

visualize the form of the deity, recite the mantra, and cultivate both an understanding of identity with the form of the deity and an understanding of the emptiness of that form. Thereafter, this view is extended beyond the limits of the meditation session to encompass all our activities.

Wherever we are and whatever we do, the totality of our experience is made a part of this "raft of meditation practice," so that we can incorporate and utilize all this energy and experience in our practice. As we go about our daily activities, we perceive sights, sounds, and mental states in this special, transformed way. In other words, we grasp the elements of our entire experience by the handle, not by the blade. Through the techniques of Vajrayana meditation, we learn to handle these sights, sounds, and mental states skillfully, so that we do not come to grief. We learn to handle sights that we see, sounds that we hear, and mental states that we experience so that, instead of being ensnared by these experiences, we can use them for our mental development and progress toward enlightenment.

Chapter Trenty-Five
Myth and Symbolism

In Chapter 24 we talked about how the special characteristic of the Vajrayana is its use of the totality of experience to achieve direct or immediate knowledge of nonduality. In turning the totality of experience to the use of this spiritual or religious endeavor, it is important that we select elements of experience that are specially powerful and meaningful. This does not exclude using the totality of our experience for our spiritual progress. Rather, it means that we focus first on types of experience that are particularly powerful and meaningful, using them as the building blocks of our transformed vision. We then extend that transformed experience so that it eventually encompasses all experiences, even those that were originally less significant.

Initially, then, we select elements of experience that are specially potent and powerful. In the process, certain archetypal elements are isolated. Archetypal elements of experience are those that have a very deep-seated mode of being within both an individual consciousness and our collective consciousness (that is, the sum total of all individual consciousness).

Let us look at some specific examples of archetypal experience. The first belongs to the realm of myth. The most dominant feature of myth is the struggle between good and evil. This is perhaps the primordial, fundamental mythological theme, and has been worked out in myths from the beginning of time up to the present day. For example, the crux of the contest between Rama and Ravana in the *Ramayana* is the

struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, and this continues to be a dominant theme in most popular myths. Not so long ago, we even saw the theme of the struggle between good and evil mythologized in the popular science-fiction movie *Star Wars*.

We see this theme also in the attitudes and rhetoric of politicians and national leaders. For example, when U.S. President Ronald Reagan called the USSR "the Evil Empire," he was borrowing a phrase from *Star Wars* to indicate his conviction that the struggle between the democratic world and the communist world was one of good against evil. This is a very important theme in human culture. When we call this theme a mythological one, it does not devalue it. If anything, this increases its value because it gives that theme a superhuman dimension, a universal significance. To call a theme mythological does not make it unreal—in fact, it makes it more so.

Good and evil are, of course, a duality (like subject and object, self and other, samsara and nirvana, and the rest).The transcendence of the duality of good and evil, the mastery of and assimilation of evil by good, is represented symbolically in the appearance of the deities of the Vajrayana pantheon. In Chapter 24, we talked about how we could transform elements of experience and put make use of them for our spiritual progress. What we have here is the mastery of what we would normally think of as evil by good—namely, the assimilation and transformation of the mythical totality of evil in the form of specific elements of the Vajrayana pantheon.

This explains the general appearance of the deities of the Vajrayana pantheon. Those of you who have seen tantric paintings and sculptures may have wondered why the deities wear necklaces of severed heads, ornaments of bone, and so forth, and also at the prevalence of animal skins, skeletons, weapons, and the like. Why, in Vajrayana iconography, is there so much of the macabre?

The answer is that the ornaments of bone, human and animal parts, weapons,

and so on are all paraphernalia of the forces of evil as they are conceived of in our collective consciousness. The fact that they are now worn and wielded by Vajrayana deities symbolizes several things: (1) it symbolizes the victory of good over evil; (2) it indicates the use of the power of evil for the purpose of good; and most importantly, (3) it represents the union and transcendence of the duality of good and evil, nirvana and samsara.

On a mythical scale, this is how we are to understand the particular nature of the appearance of the Vajrayana deities—as an expression of the mastery and transformation of evil, and as an expression of the transcendence of the duality of good and evil.

The Vajrayana also promotes the equality of objects of desire and aversion. This equality implies transcendence of the opposites of desire and aversion, good and evil. In the symbolism of the Vajrayana, we find objects of desire and aversion in close proximity. For example, we find jewels and severed heads, a desirable female form and a corpse, lotuses, the sun and the moon and blood, meat and bones side by side in the same portrait. All these objects occurring side by side are symbolic of the transcendence of the dualities of good and evil, desirable and undesirable, pure and impure, and the like.

Let us examine, in slightly more concrete terms, the particular forms of some of the archetypal symbols we find in the Vajrayana, many of which have still to do with the transcendence of duality. First let us consider the symbol of the union of male and female, which is so dominant in the Vajrayana tradition. This is a symbol that is archetypal in the sense that it has always been a fundamental part of the experience of living beings. It is a deep-seated element in the individual and collective consciousness of living beings. The union of male and female has served as a symbol of the union of opposites—very often as a symbol of the union of heaven and earth—

in the arts, poetry, and literature of most cultures at one time or another.

In the Vajrayana, we find the prevalent use of this very powerful and meaningful element of experience to depict or symbolize the union of emptiness and form, nirvana and samsara, wisdom and compassion. The female aspect stands for emptiness, nirvana, and wisdom, as we saw in Chapter 22, where insubstantiality was represented in the form of the goddesses Nairatmya and Vajravarahi. The male aspect stands for form (phenomenal appearance), samsara, and compassion (skillful means). The female can also stand for emptiness and the male for luminosity, and so on.

Another prevalent symbol used in Vajrayana iconography is the tree, which is a symbol of life, growth, and development. When taking refuge at the beginning of a session of Vajrayana meditation, the meditator often pictures the objects of refuge placed in a tree. Like the union of male and female, the tree is an archetypal symbol that has cross-cultural significance.

I have been surprised to find the tree appearing in the symbolism of almost all the major religious and cultural traditions throughout the world. In the Christian tradition, we find the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden. In the Buddhist tradition, too, the tree is an important archetypal symbol. Specifically, the refuge tree may be identified with the pipal or *bodhi* tree. But the tree of enlightenment goes back to a period in Indian cultural history before the time of the Buddha Shakyamuni. It seems also to have been important to the people of the Indus Valley civilization, which flourished in the third millennium B.C.E.

If we look further at Vajrayana iconography, we often find a deity placed upon a throne in a tree. The throne is an archetypal symbol of royalty, of sovereignty and mastery, as are the crown and scepter. You may recall that in Chapter 22 we said that the Vajrayana takes its name from the vajra, the scepter of Indra, which is a symbol of

mastery. There is no doubt that these symbols are important in our individual and collective consciousness. Even in republican societies, there is a great fascination with royalty. Americans probably read more about the English royal family than do Englishmen. There are probably more television documentaries and dramatizations about the English royal family produced in America than in England. Even the institution of the presidency has come to be associated with all kinds of symbols of sovereignty.

Like the symbol of the tree, royal symbolism is found in most of the major religious traditions. Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God and was called the king of the Jews. The Buddha has been called the king of the Dharma and the king of physicians. The first discourse the Buddha delivered, popularly known as *The Discourse of the Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma (Dhammachakkappavattana Sutta),* is actually entitled *The Discourse of the Founding of the Kingdom of the Dharma.*

Like the tree, light and water occupy prominent places in Vajrayana symbolism. Fire often surrounds the deities. Light is an important medium for identification between the meditator and the visualized forms of the deities. Fire and light are very important and meaningful elements of our human experience. It is probably through the discovery of fire that people became civilized. All of this is still very clearly evident today, for don't we all like to kindle, watch, and manipulate fire? In the Vajrayana tradition, fire stands for the flames that consume and destroy ignorance.

Water is more crucial to our existence than food and is, of course, necessary for the fertility of the earth. Not surprisingly, water also plays an important role in the Vajrayana, where it is the symbol of initiation—the tantric ritual which stimulates the seed of spiritual potential. Just as by watering the soil, a seed of grain comes to life, so by being sprinkled in the ritual of initiation, the seed of one's spiritual potential

puts forth its sprout, which can then grow into the fully realized and transformed mode of being, the reality of Buddhahood.

The symbol of the lotus is not peculiar only to the Vajrayana but exists in all Buddhist iconography. It is more culturally specific than the other symbols we have considered thus far. The lotus is perhaps most closely linked with the Indian cultural consciousness, where it is a powerful symbol of spiritual growth and transformation. For this reason, it appears in the Vajrayana as a symbol of spiritual growth, transcendence, and transformation.

In the Vajrayana, there is also the very particular use of letters, words, and mantras. This is, again, archetypal, in the sense that it is a deep-seated and powerful element in the individual and collective consciousness. For "primitive" and "modern" people alike, the name of a thing is a source of power over it. Ancient peoples achieved mastery over the forces of nature by giving those forces names. For instance, by calling the thunderstorm "Indra," the old Brahmins established a mechanism and degree of control over it.

This is also clearly reflected in our own experience. If someone side-swipes your car in the parking lot, you do not have any power over him or her if you do not know their name, but if you know the name of the person responsible, you can claim damages. Names are, therefore, power. In a sense, a name creates the reality of the object for which it stands. For example, when I say the word "diamond," in a sense the reality of that object is created for all of us. Recognizing this power of letters, names, and words, the Vajrayana employs them in the form of mantras in order to bring about a certain kind of reality.

In the Vajrayana, the naive assumption of the power inherent in names that was characteristic of early human existence is replaced by a critical understanding of the way names and words work to create a particular reality. The way they work is

through the power of the mind. It is the power of the mind that enables letters, words, names, and mantras to possess a particular kind of creative reality.

Thus we find, in Vajrayana symbolism, a liberal and intentional use of these verbal symbols as vehicles for concentrating the mind's power to create and transform. For example, we symbolize the mind with the Sanskrit syllable *Hum,* and use that symbol as a vehicle for representing the mind visually as the seed of the various deities of the Vajrayana pantheon. A deep-seated archetypal role is played by letters, words, and names in our individual and collective consciousness. The Vajrayana uses this archetypal power in its symbolism, in order to describe the mind and facilitate its use in mastering and transforming experience.

Vajrayana iconography also recognizes the importance and significance of colors as symbols of certain tendencies and attitudes. This is something that has also been acknowledged by modern psychologists. In the mid-1930s, a famous American psychologist persuaded a popular cigarette company to change the logo on its packaging from green to red; overnight, sales shot up by 50 to 60 percent. When that limited run of packages with the red logo was sold, the manufacturer went back to the green logo and sales dropped by the same amount. When the logo was changed to red again, sales shot up again. Ever since, advertisers and designers have paid very close attention to the effects of color on prospective buyers.

This is also recognized in the Vajrayana tradition. There are particular roles and uses for particular colors. White, for example, is a symbol of purity—a significance which is common, universal, and apparent. But white is also a symbol of opaqueness, ignorance, and, alternatively, a symbol of the knowledge of the Dharmadhatu. This last explains why, in the *mandala* of the five celestial Buddhas, Vairochana is portrayed as white in color, and why, in the Vajrayana pantheon, Vajrasattva is portrayed as white to indicate his importance for the purification of sins.

Blue or black is a symbol of immutability. Black, unlike any other color, cannot be changed. Blue is a color that symbolizes hatred, on the one hand, and the knowledge that reflects all phenomena without distorting them, on the other (like the blue of water that reflects innumerable objects impartially). Therefore, blue is the color of what is called the mirror-like knowledge.

Red, which is the color of fire, is a symbol of desire and also stands for the knowledge of discrimination.

These colors are used to carry symbolic messages in connection not only with the five celestial Buddhas, but also with other tantric deities. These messages often operate at an unconscious or subconscious level, but their particular significance nonetheless triggers certain emotions or reactions (again, often on a subconscious level). One example of this is the fact that smokers who bought the cigarettes with the red logo instead of the green one did not know why they were moved to do so.

Let us now look at some of the more particular objects we find in Vajrayana art and iconography, and at their specific meanings—objects like the support, or base, of Vajrayana deities, the objects the deities hold in their hands, and the ornaments that adorn their bodies. The Vajrayana deity Vajrakilaya, for example, tramples on two deities of the Hindu pantheon, Shiva and Parvati. Initially, one might think that this is merely a kind of triumphalism on the part of the Buddhists, but the significance is actually far more important. Shiva and Parvati stand for the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. The base on which Vajrakilaya stands is therefore a symbol of the transcendence, or avoidance, of these two extremes. Again, we find the Vajrayana deity Mahakala standing on a corpse. The corpse represents self, ego, and substance; Mahakala's trampling it thus represents his triumph over the idea of self, or substance.

Many of the Vajrayana deities hold knives in their hands. This is anticipated in

Mahayana iconography, where we find Manjushri holding a sword of wisdom with which he cuts through the net of ignorance. In the hands of the Vajrayana deities, too, knives are instruments symbolizing the wisdom with which they cut through ignorance and delusion.

In Vajrayana iconography we also find deities drinking from skull cups filled with blood, which represents the afflictions. By drinking this blood, the deities symbolically show their ability to assimilate and neutralize the afflictions.

We find Vajrayana deities commonly holding a vajra and bell. The *vajra* is a symbol of skillful means, and the bell is a symbol of wisdom. Their holding the vajra and bell stands for the unity of skillful means and wisdom, appearance and emptiness, samsara and nirvana.

Many Vajrayana deities, too, have crowns of five skulls on their heads. These five skulls stand for the five transcendental knowledges, or wisdoms, that belong to the five celestial Buddhas: (a) the knowledge of the Dharmadhatu, (b) the mirror-like knowledge, (c) the knowledge of equality, (d) the knowledge of discrimination, and (e) the knowledge of accomplishment. Many of their bodies are adorned with six ornaments of bone—bracelets, anklets, girdles, and so forth. These six ornaments stand for the Six Perfections of generosity, morality, patience, energy, concentration, and wisdom.

The fact that we find such objects prevalent in Vajrayana iconography does not merely indicate some kind of fascination with the bizarre and macabre. Rather, these objects are very closely connected with several levels of meaning: (i) a very deep unconscious (or subconscious) level of meaning, (ii) a level of meaning that has to do with cultural archetypes, and (iii) a level of meaning that is very specifically and precisely related to particular elements of the Buddhist path.

On the broadest level, we have been dealing here with great, sweeping dualities:

mythological themes, the theme of good and evil, the archetypes of male and female, and so forth. More specifically, we have been dealing with archetypes that have particular power and meaning for living beings—the archetypes of the tree, throne, fire, and so on; the extremes of eternalism and nihilism; the values of skillful means and wisdom. On an even more specific level, we have been looking at symbolic objects that relate to particular items of Buddhist doctrine, like the five transcendental knowledges and Six Perfections.

What I have tried to do in this chapter is give some indication of the way Vajrayana myths and symbols work, and of the meaning of the various portrayals and images we find in Vajrayana iconography. It is a mistake to regard the imagery and symbolism of the Vajrayana as in any way arbitrary, accidental, or simply sensational. On the contrary, the Vajrayana tradition makes a conscious and carefully calculated use of myth and symbol for the particular purpose of accelerating the practitioner's progress toward Buddhahood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX
Psychology, Physiology, and Cosmology

In the Vajrayana tradition, psychology, physiology, and cosmology are closely interrelated. In this chapter I would like to show how this is the case, and also sketch in general terms the benefits of this interrelationship.

Let us begin by referring once again to the idea of interdependence and interpenetration. Interdependence is synonymous with relativity, or emptiness, and it is one of the two pillars of the Vajrayana tradition. In this particular context, interdependence has a specific meaning—namely, interpenetration. Insofar as everything depends on everything else for its existence and nature, so everything holds within itself the seeds, the causes and conditions, of everything else. Specifically, we can understand this by focusing on the idea of the interdependence of the parts and the whole. The nature of the whole depends on the nature of the parts, and the nature of the parts depends on the nature of the whole. This is the interdependence of parts and whole.

Traditionally, we see this idea elaborated in the Mahayana in parables such as that of the net of Indra. In this parable, each part of the net depends for its existence and nature on the other parts, and each small part of the net in a sense contains in miniature the characteristics of the net as a whole. This idea of interdependence or interpenetration of parts and whole became very important in China, too, where it is probably the single most important idea in Hua-yen philosophy, or the philosophy of totality.

The idea of interpenetration is found in the Vajrayana tradition as well, where we can see it expressed even in the term *tantra* itself. You may remember that *tantra* refers primarily and literally to the idea of the weave in a piece of cloth or fabric (see Chapter 22). Using the analogy of cloth or fabric, we can understand the interpenetration of parts and whole when we see that a small section of fabric reveals the pattern that extends throughout the whole.

The idea of the interpenetration of parts and whole is also expressed in the Vajrayana in the notion of the interpenetration of individual beings (who here represent the parts, or microcosms) and the universe (which represents the whole, or macrocosm). This notion of man and the universe as microcosm and macrocosm is the first idea I want to consider by way of introduction to a more specific treatment of psychology, physiology, and cosmology in the Vajrayana.

To understand the dynamic role of psychology, physiology, and cosmology in the Vajrayana tradition, we need also to recall the second fundamental idea of the Vajrayana tradition—the idea of the variability of experience. This is expressed in the experience of Asanga, who saw the Buddha Maitreya first not at all, then in the form of a diseased dog, and finally in his celestial and transformed aspect. This idea is also expressed in the fact that the beings who inhabit the six realms of existence view phenomena differently: this is the variability of experience relative to the conditioned state of one's mind. Thus reality is dependent on the conditions of one's mind: an impure mind will perceive and experience reality in one way, whereas a transformed and purified mind will experience it in another.

It is important to keep both interpenetration and the variability of experience in mind if we are going to understand the relationship between the individual and the universe in Vajrayana psychology, physiology, and cosmology, and if we are going to understand how this relationship functions dynamically to bring about the

transformation that is the goal of Vajrayana practice.

Let us first look specifically at psychology within the Vajrayana tradition. Thus far I have been at pains to show that the Vajrayana is a natural and logical development of the Buddhist tradition as a whole, as we find it embodied in the Theravada and Mahayana. Given this fact, it is not surprising that Vajrayana psychology takes as its basic building blocks elements which belong to a system that is central to Buddhist psychology in general.

These building blocks are the five aggregates. As in the Theravada and Mahayana, the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness function as the basic components of Vajrayana psychology. In the impure condition of mind—the condition common to all of us before we have transformed our experience—these five aggregates are associated respectively with the five afflictions, or defilements, of ignorance, pride, attachment, envy, and aversion. You will notice the presence of the three basic afflictions that are causes of the experience of suffering and, in addition to them, the afflictions of pride and envy.

We can also see the five afflictions in relation to the five realms of existence that are not conducive to liberation. In this context, ignorance corresponds to the realm of animals, pride to the realm of the gods, attachment to the realm of the hungry ghosts, envy to the realm of the demigods, and aversion to the realm of the hell beings. It is interesting to note that the five afflictions also constitute the causes of birth in the five unfavorable realms of existence.

This is the picture of reality seen from the point of view of the untransformed mode of being, the impure vision which is typical of our experience, and which was typical of Asanga's experience when he was unable to see Maitreya. Even in the Perfection of Wisdom literature, we find statements to the effect that, as a Bodhisattva progresses toward Buddhahood, his aggregates become perfectly pure.

In the Vajrayana, this general statement is given positive and specific content so that, in Vajrayana psychology, the five aggregates are transformed and appear in the form of the five celestial Buddhas when the mind has been purified by the cultivation of wholesome conditions. Thus, in their transformed mode of being, the five aggregates appear as the five celestial Buddhas: the aggregate of form, when purified, appears in the form of the Buddha Vairochana; feeling, in the form of Ratnasambhava; perception, in the form of Amitabha; volition, in the form of Amoghasiddhi; and consciousness, in the form of Akshobhya.

Some of you may have seen these five celestial Buddhas iconographically portrayed in the *mandala*, a sacred or magical circle which is a representation of the purified or transformed universe. What the five celestial Buddhas represent is the five components of psycho-physical being in their transformed and purified mode of being. The five celestial Buddhas together represent the transformation of our impure experience into a purified, or liberated, mode of being.

Incidentally, these five celestial Buddhas are also said to be the Buddhas of the Five Families: the Buddha, Ratna (or jewel), Padma (or lotus), Karma, and Vajra families, respectively. These are the symbols that stand for the five aggregates in their transformed mode of being.

Just as, on the untransformed and impure level, the five aggregates are associated with the five afflictions, so on the transformed and purified level, the five celestial Buddhas correspond to the five transcendental knowledges, or wisdoms. The first of these transcendental knowledges is the knowledge of the Dharmadhatu, which corresponds to the Buddha Vairochana. The knowledge of the Dharmadhatu is the knowledge of things as they are in reality, the knowledge of the quintessential nature or character of things. In other words, the Dharmadhatu is that essential nature of all phenomena which is their emptiness, their nonduality. Thus the

transformed aggregate of form is the Buddha Vairochana, and this transformation similarly implies a transformation from the affliction of ignorance to the transcendental knowledge of the true nature of all things, or emptiness.

Second, with the Buddha Ratnasambhava, who is the transformed appearance of the aggregate of feeling, we have a transformation of the affliction of pride into the transcendental knowledge of equality. This is the knowledge which makes all things equal. Here, again, we have a specific echo of something which occurs in the Perfection of Wisdom literature. In the *Heart Sutra,* it is said that the perfection of wisdom makes the unequal equal. In the case of Ratnasambhava, we have the knowledge which makes things equal. More than anything else, the knowledge of equality sees no distinction between samsara and nirvana. The transcendental knowledge of equality which sees no distinction between samsara and nirvana enables the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to operate freely in the world.

Third, in the case of the aggregate of perception, which in its transformed and purified dimension becomes the Buddha Amitabha, we have a corresponding transformation of the affliction of attachment into the transcendental knowledge of discrimination. This is the knowledge which is able to see all things according to their individual characteristics. In a sense, this corresponds to the knowledge of the Dharmadhatu, which is the knowledge of the quintessential and universal character of all things—that is, emptiness. As a complement to the knowledge of the Dharmadhatu, we have the knowledge of discrimination, which is the knowledge of the particular characteristics of all things.

Fourth, in the case of the aggregate of volition, which on the purified level takes the form of the Buddha Amoghasiddhi, we have a transformation of the affliction of envy into the transcendental knowledge of accomplishment. This knowledge is the ability to know with precision the exact situation of all sentient beings so that they

can best be helped to progress toward Buddhahood.

Finally, in the case of the aggregate of consciousness, which on the purified level takes the form of the Buddha Akshobhya, we have a transformation of the affliction of ill-will into the transcendental knowledge known as the mirror-like knowledge—the ability to reflect all things in the manner of the mirror. The mirror reflects precisely whatever is presented to it but remains itself unchanged, unaffected by the images that it reflects.

You can see that there is here a symmetrical arrangement of basic psychophysical constituents, with the five aggregates on the impure level corresponding to the five celestial Buddhas on the purified level. Similarly, there is a symmetrical arrangement of the five afflictions on the untransformed, or impure, level corresponding to the five knowledges on the transformed and purified level.

This symmetrical arrangement between an impure and a pure experience is carried over into the building blocks of matter as well. On the purified level, the five elements of the world—earth, water, fire, air, and space—take the forms of the five celestial female deities who are consorts of the five celestial Buddhas. The element of space, which corresponds to the aggregate of form, is transformed on the purified level into a female deity who is the consort of the Buddha Vairochana. The elements of earth, fire, air, and water, which correspond to the aggregates of feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness, respectively, are transformed at the purified level into the female deities who are the consorts of Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi, and Akshobhya, respectively.

In Vajrayana psychology, therefore, we have aggregates, afflictions, and elements on the ordinary, impure level which are transformed on the purified level into the five celestial Buddhas, the five transcendental knowledges, and the five female deities who are consorts of the five celestial Buddhas. We have two levels of

experience that are symmetrical, one level of experience being typical of an impure form of existence, the other of a purified form of existence. This is the basic scheme of Vajrayana psychology.

In the system of Vajrayana physiology, these five celestial Buddhas, along with their five consorts, are found within the body of each individual person. They are situated at five centers of psychic energy, called *chakras*, which are found within the body of every person. The five centers of psychic energy are situated at the top of the head, the throat, the heart, the navel, and the genitals. At each place, there is one of the five celestial Buddhas with his consort seated on a lotus throne: the Buddha Vairochana, who is the purified dimension of the aggregate of form, is at the top of the head; Amitabha, who is the purified dimension of perception, is at the throat; Akshobhya, who is the purified dimension of consciousness, is at the heart; Ratnasambhava, who is the purified dimension of feeling, is at the navel; and Amoghasiddhi, who is the purified dimension of volition, is situated at the genitals.

There are a number of channels of psychic energy, called *nadis*, connecting these centers of psychic energy. Although there are a great number of these channels, there are three which are very important: the central psychic channel (*avadhuti*), which runs directly from the top of the head to the genitals and which connects the five *cakras*; and the two psychic channels on the right and left of the central channel (the *rasana* and *lalana*, respectively). On the level of advanced Vajrayana practice, the practitioner is able to manipulate and direct the flow of psychic energy—which is none other than the energy of mind alone—through these psychic channels. This enables him or her to unite the opposites which are reflected in the psycho-physical experience of the individual person and in the universe as a whole, in order to realize within him- or herself in meditation the absolute union of all opposites, the annihilation of all dualities, which is the goal of tantric practice.

Through this very brief portrayal of Vajrayana physiology, you can see how the basic building blocks of psycho-physical experience, be they viewed from the impure level or from the purified level, are reflected in the physiological makeup of the person.

Through achieving the union of opposites within his psycho-physical experience as an individual person, the Vajrayana adept is able to bring about the transformation of his vision of the universe as a whole. He is able to do this because his body is a microcosm of the universe. In Vajrayana cosmology, the features of the universe as a whole are present within the psycho-physical experience of each person. Mount Sumeru, the central mountain of the universe according to Buddhist cosmology, is situated within the body of the practitioner, just as the sun and moon, the sacred rivers of India, and pilgrimage places are found within the body in a microcosmic way.

Not only are these features of the universe situated within the body but so, too, are the primary features of the transformed or purified experience. We have already seen that the five celestial Buddhas are found within the body at the five centers of psychic energy. In the same way, we find that the experience of the individual person is in fact none other than the experience of the celestial or purified universe, so that the body is in fact the celestial mansion of the divine Buddhas. In Vajrayana psychology, physiology, and cosmology, therefore, we find the real meaning of the expression that "The body is a temple." It is a temple that contains the celestial Buddhas, who are none other than the transformed mode of being of the ordinary mode of being of the psycho-physical components, or aggregates.

You can see how, in the Vajrayana tradition, a close correspondence is drawn between the ordinary level of experience and the purified level of experience. This correspondence is established through the idea of microcosm and macrocosm.

Specifically, the Vajrayana supplies a special psychological and physiological scheme of the elements of experience precisely so that they can be subjected to the direct and efficient manipulation of the mind. This scheme employs the centers of psychic energy and the channels through which psychic energy flows.

What I have tried to do in this chapter is show that, in the Vajrayana system of psychology, physiology, and cosmology, as in Vajrayana myth and symbol, we do not have an arcane and exotic portrayal of haphazard or arbitrary forms. Rather, we have a very carefully designed system which accords with the fundamental principles of the Buddhist path to liberation. What we have is really just a particularly rich and colorful development of the suggestions we have seen in the earlier Buddhist traditions, in the psychology of the Abhidharma and in the Perfection of Wisdom literature. In the Vajrayana tradition, all these suggestions receive a very definite content. The Vajrayana supplies colorful, bright, and attractive representations of the various components of psycho-physical experience, and a description of how their transformation can be achieved through the gradual purification of one's mode of being.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN
The Preliminary Practices

In Chapters 22 through 26, I tried to outline what we might call the universe of experience of the Vajrayana. That is why I began with a consideration of the cultural and intellectual climate in which the Vajrayana first appeared, and only then went on to consider its religious and philosophical background, methodology, myth and symbol, and psychology, physiology, and cosmology. In Chapters 27 through 29, I will look at the actual stages in the practice of the Vajrayana path. In general, there are three such stages: (1) the preliminary or preparatory stage, (2) the stage of entry, and (3) the actual practice. I have divided the preliminary stage into two categories: general and specific.

As mentioned in Chapter 22, the Mahayana and Vajrayana are in fact two components of a single tradition. Their starting point and goal are identical; they differ only in the methods employed in getting from that starting point to the goal. From this we can understand that, in terms of general preliminaries, there is a great deal of similarity between what is required for Mahayana practice and what is required for Vajrayana practice.

We need to touch on the preliminaries briefly to emphasize again that the Vajrayana practices are not ones that can be undertaken without the proper kind of preparation. In fact, the general preliminaries required for Vajrayana practice are those required for the whole of the Mahayana path. In this category of general preliminary practices, we have (1) the taking of refuge, followed by (2) contemplation

of suffering, (3) the law of karma, (4) death and impermanence, and (5) the opportune and fortunate nature of the human situation; (6) cultivation of love and compassion; and (7) production of the enlightenment thought. We conclude with (8) cultivation of one-pointedness, or concentration, and penetrative insight. All these serve as a general prerequisite to Vajrayana practice.

With a few exceptions, the general preliminary practices of the Vajrayana are similar to those of the Mahayana. One of the exceptions is the way the taking of refuge is practiced. Whereas in the Mahayana tradition there are the three objects of refuge—the Enlightened One, his teaching, and the Noble Assembly of the irreversible Bodhisattvas or Bodhisattvas who have attained the seventh stage of the Bodhisattva path and are therefore not liable to relapse, in the Vajrayana there is also the fourth refuge—the preceptor (the guru or lama). In certain traditions within the Vajrayana fold, there may be as many as six objects of refuge, the two additional ones being the tutelary deities and the *dakinis*. The tutelary deities are the special esoteric forms of the Buddha who are any one of the major tantric deities—Hevajra, Chakrasamvara, and the like—meditation upon whom is a complete path to enlightenment. The *dakinis* are female deities who are symbolic or representative of insubstantiality. In the Vajrayana pantheon, the *dakinis* occupy a position in some ways analogous to that of the Noble Assembly, being the special tantric or Vajrayana forms of the Sangha. Although in certain traditions and contexts we do have references to these six objects of refuge, it is far more common to find the four objects of refuge, that is, the preceptor and the Triple Gem.

The preceptor is particularly important in the Vajrayana tradition. Let me refer to two ideas that illustrate the role and importance of the preceptor in the Vajrayana tradition. First, the preceptor performs a function similar to that of a magnifying glass. We know that the sun is very hot and has great power, yet without a device

like the magnifying glass we cannot harness its heat to kindle a fire. Similarly, although the Buddha and his teachings are very powerful, without the preceptor they are unable to kindle the fire of wisdom within a disciple. The preceptor functions as a means of concentrating and harnessing the power of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha in such a way as to make that power effective and immediately applicable to the disciple's own needs.

Recognizing this role of the preceptor has always been of the greatest importance. We will understand this better if we consider the story of Marpa, one of the more famous Tibetans who journeyed to India in order to receive the Vajrayana teaching from Naropa. Marpa made three journeys to India and studied at length with Naropa. It is said that on one occasion, when the manifestation of a tutelary deity appeared before him, Marpa made the mistake of bowing to the appearance of the deity rather than to his preceptor, Naropa. The karmic consequences of this lapse were that Marpa later lost his sons to accidents and had no descendants to whom he could pass on the teachings he had received. This is one of a number of stories which indicate the need to recognize the importance of the preceptor in the Vajrayana tradition.

In Chapter 29, I will show how the last two components in these general preliminaries—the cultivation of single-pointedness and penetrative insight—are applied to one's practice in the context of Vajrayana meditation. For the time being, let me repeat that these general preliminaries are indispensable prerequisites to serious Vajrayana practice. No tradition within Tibetan Buddhism encourages the commencement of Vajrayana practice without having spent a really substantial amount of time on these preliminary practices. All the Tibetan Vajrayana traditions have extensive oral and written material on the cultivation and practice of these preliminaries. Although it does sometimes happen that people go on to Vajrayana

practice without having spent an appropriate amount of time on these general preliminaries, they do so at their own risk. However, I do not mean to indulge in scare mongering. What I mean is that if you do somehow manage to go on to your university education without having undergone pre-university training, you are liable to have a much more difficult time in your university career.

I would like to make one more observation before treating the particular preliminary practices that are special to the Vajrayana. I have gone to great lengths to show the integrated nature of the three major Buddhist traditions of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, and have tried to show that the Vajrayana represents a natural extension of elements found in other Buddhist traditions. I would therefore like to draw your attention to two steps in these general preliminary practices: the taking of refuge, and the awakening of the enlightenment thought, or acceptance of the Bodhisattva vows. I would like to suggest that these can be regarded as initiations of a kind. Another practice which may be seen as analogous to initiation is the novitiate, or entrance into the Buddhist Order.

All three of these practices may be thought of as varieties of initiations. All involve entrance into a community with a particular set of practices: in the case of taking refuge, the ceremony represents entry into the Buddhist community; in the case of the novitiate, it represents entry into the monastic community; and in the case of the Bodhisattva vows, entry into the lineage or family of the Buddha. These three ceremonies are, in a sense, initiations that involve taking on certain commitments: taking refuge brings along with it the commitment to try to observe the precepts of a layperson; entering the monastic order brings with it the commitment to observe the precepts of a novice; and taking the Bodhisattva vows brings with it the commitments of the Bodhisattva. There are aspects of the institutions of refuge, novitiate, and Bodhisattva vows that are similar to important elements in the

Vajrayana initiation.

Let us go on to look at the specific preliminary practices generally required for Vajrayana practice. It is not imperative that one complete the preliminaries before beginning any kind of Vajrayana practice. It is also not imperative that one complete these preliminaries before receiving Vajrayana initiation. It is, however, imperative that one complete them before undertaking meditational retreat on one of the major Vajrayana tutelary deities. For really serious Vajrayana practice, these specific preliminaries are required.

The term for these preliminaries in Tibetan is *ngon-dro,* which literally means "going before." Hence these practices go before serious practice. There are four specific preliminary practices common to all the Vajrayana traditions: (1) refuge, (2) confession, (3) preceptor yoga, and (4) mandala offering. Each has to be performed one hundred thousand times. In addition to these four, certain traditions require the performance of prostrations, and others require alternative rituals.

Refuge. As already mentioned, in the Vajrayana tradition one takes refuge in four "objects"—the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, and preceptor, or guru. Taking refuge involves visualization of the objects of refuge either separately or together: (a) one can visualize one's preceptor, the Buddha, the texts, and the Noble Assembly separately, or (b) one can visualize the four objects of refuge integrated or combined into the single figure of the tutelary deity. Some of you may have seen this visualization portrayed in painted scrolls, with the objects of refuge pictured in a tree, on a jeweled throne, on a lotus and a sun or moon disk (for more on some of these symbols, see Chapter 25). Using this visualization of the four objects of refuge, we recite a refuge formula one hundred thousand times.

Confession. For convenience, I have called the second specific preliminary practice "confession" because it is commonly referred to by this name. However, it is

important to remember here that we are not concerned with confession as a means of securing forgiveness. We do not use the term in the same sense in which it is used in Christianity, where the confession of sins is followed by forgiveness from an external power. In this context, confession merely implies our own recognition of unwholesome actions done in the past, and our resolve not to repeat them. Especially important in this practice of confession of unwholesome actions is the Buddha Vajrasattva, another special form of the Buddha similar to the Buddhas of the Five Families. Vajrasattva is an archetypal form of the Buddha who embodies the state of enlightenment for the special purpose of the confession and purification of unwholesome actions.

Vajrasattva appears in the Mahayana pantheon as well, and the practice of confession of unwholesome actions is one of the preliminaries performed by all who embark on the Bodhisattva path. Vajrasattva is white in color. He has a single face and two hands, and holds a vajra and a bell, which stand for skillful means and wisdom, respectively. In the specific preliminary practice of confession, we meditate on Vajrasattva and recite the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva one hundred thousand times.

It is said that four powers issue from the practice of the confession and purification of unwholesome actions. The first power is the "power of the shrine," which refers to the power of Vajrasattva as a symbol of purification. There is a certain power which issues from visualization of the form of Vajrasattva. This is a symbolic power, similar to the kind of power that issues, in the mundane context, from a symbol such as the national flag. The national flag has a symbolic power; similarly, in the sacred context of meditation, the image of Vajrasattva has a certain power, the power of symbol.

The second of the four powers is the "power of transcendence," of going

beyond. This refers to a sincere renunciation of unwholesome actions. In other words, in the course of the meditation, unwholesome actions are transcended.

The third power that issues from this practice is the "power of habitual antidote," or the power of persistent correction, which refers to the sincere resolve not to repeat the unwholesome actions one has done in the past. This is the power to refrain from doing unwholesome actions again in the future.

The fourth power is the "power of restoration." This refers to the fact that, insofar as unwholesome actions belong to the level of conditioned reality, they do not really penetrate to the core of one's own being, which is the Buddha mind, or the nature of emptiness. Unwholesome actions are, in reality, adventitious. They are like the dirt that soils a white cloth, or the smoke or cloud that obscures the sky. Because of this, meditation on Vajrasattva results in the power of restoration, which is the realization of our intrinsic purity.

Preceptor Yoga. The third preliminary is called preceptor yoga. The preceptor (guru or lama) is an accomplished master who bestows tantric initiations and special spiritual attainments. Although it is quite common for those not conversant with the Tibetan tradition to refer to any Tibetan monk as a *lama,* in the Tibetan tradition this term is reserved for such qualified masters, while ordinary monks are referred to simply as *gelong* (*bhikshu*). The term *yoga* means "yoking together," connecting or identifying.

The purpose of preceptor yoga is to establish a close bond between disciple and master. Here again, we can see the importance of the preceptor in the Vajrayana tradition. This practice can take different forms, which differ slightly. However, in general it involves the recitation, one hundred thousand times, of a formula that expresses a disciple's devotion to and regard for the qualities of the preceptor.

I would like to expand on what I said earlier about the importance of the

preceptor in the Vajrayana tradition—why this is and must be so. The Vajrayana tradition is first and foremost an oral tradition, handed down from master to disciple. The association or connection between master and disciple is particularly important. This association leads to the formation of lineage. Lineage is, of course, important not only in the Vajrayana but also in the Buddhist tradition as a whole, especially when it comes to monastic ordination. If you look at the history of monasticism in Sri Lanka and Thailand, you will notice the importance accorded to it. Because of discontinuation of the lineage of monastic ordination, special envoys had to be sent from one Theravada country to another on a number of occasions, simply to renew the lineage.

Lineage is like an electric circuit. When the lineage is broken, the ordination of new disciples cannot take place. This also occurred in the monastic history of Tibet when, after the persecution of Buddhism under King Lan-dar-ma, the lineage of monastic ordination had to be reestablished with the help of Chinese monks. Thus lineage is extremely important. It is important in the Vajrayana tradition because it is by means of lineage—the unbroken chain connecting master and disciple—that the Vajrayana teachings are handed down from one generation to the next.

The concept of lineage implies the identity of each link in the chain, each member of the lineage. Consequently, the figure of the preceptor secures identification between the master, disciple, and tutelary deity. Later, the disciple him or herself forges this bond as he or she develops his or her own sense of identification with the preceptor and then with the tutelary deity.

The institution of the lineage, as it is embodied in the figure of the preceptor, cuts across time and space. It bridges the gulf that separates us, here and now, from the time and place and mode of being of the Buddha. This is why, in Vajrayana initiation and meditation practice, the preceptor is identified with the tutelary deity,

and it is then the task of the practitioner to identify with the deity through the preceptor. This practice of union with the guru is important for creating the foundation of the special relationship between practitioner and preceptor.

Mandala Offering. The fourth preliminary practice is the offering of the *mandala*. In general, a *mandala* is a sacred, symbolic (or magic) circle. In the context of the offering ritual, the *mandala* represents in symbolic form the whole mundane universe, as it is pictured in traditional Buddhist cosmology. Traditionally, the universe is said to have Mount Sumeru at its center, the four continents on each side of Mount Sumeru, four intermediate continents, and so forth. The *mandala* is a symbolic representation of this traditional cosmology.

In the practice of *mandala* offering, the practitioner offers to the four objects of refuge (the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, and preceptor) all his own merit, born of wholesome actions, in the symbolic form of the universe. He offers all his wholesome actions to these four objects, which are the repositories of all excellent qualities, for the sake of the enlightenment of all sentient beings. This offering is done a hundred thousand times. Along with the recitation, the practitioner performs a ritual using a disk of metal, stone, or wood and grains of rice, wheat, or sand, by means of which he creates symbolically the salient features of the traditional cosmology of the universe.

This practice of *mandala* offering is effective because it is the most excellent form of karma. There are five modifying conditions that intensify the weight of karma—three subjective and two objective. The three subjective conditions are (a) persistence or repetition of an action, (b) willful intention, and (c) absence of regret. The objective conditions are (d) quality and (e) indebtedness toward whom the action is directed (see also Chapter 8).

In the *mandala* offering, we have all the conditions conducive to enhancing the

weight of this wholesome karma. We have persistence, in that the offering is done a hundred thousand times. We have the intention of the practitioner to offer all his merits in this symbolic form to the enlightened ones. We also have a complete absence of regret. If we were to offer material objects, we might be liable to experience some feeling of regret. For example, if I offer a financial endowment to a monastery, I may later think that I have offered too much. But with a symbolic offering of this sort, there is no ground for that kind of feeling to arise, so the wholesome karma it generates is unopposed. Last, who is more worthy of offering than the enlightened ones, who are of the highest worth and greatest benefit to us, since it is they who make enlightenment accessible? The practice of *mandala* offering thus creates the merit required to make rapid progress along the Vajrayana path.

In short, the four specific preliminary practices have a special contribution to make in the preparation for serious Vajrayana practice. The recitation of the refuge formula establishes one firmly on the path, creating a secure shelter that protects one from discouragement and distractions. The practice of confession purifies unwholesome actions. The practice of preceptor yoga identifies practitioner and preceptor, establishing the relationship so crucial to one's progress on the Vajrayana path. Finally, the practice of *mandala* offering creates the positive potential, the wholesome energy, that one needs in making rapid and efficient strides.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT
The Vajrayana Initiation

With this chapter, we come to a rather important topic in any introduction to the Vajrayana path. Over the half century or so that Vajrayana has been known in the West and the world at large, it has been liable to a great deal of misinterpretation and misunderstanding. The element that has probably been the cause of the greatest misunderstanding is the institution of initiation. Many have objected to initiation being a component of a path in the Buddhist tradition.

As mentioned in Chapter 27, there is nothing formally different in the Vajrayana initiation that sets it apart from other rites of passage which play an important role in the Buddhist tradition. It is hard to understand why people can accept the refuge ceremony and the rite of monastic ordination but have difficulty with the idea of a Vajrayana initiation. I hope that, by indicating the contents of Vajrayana initiation and its role and function within the tradition, some of the misinterpretation and misunderstanding will be dispelled.

Let us first look at the meaning of the Sanskrit term *abhishekha*, which has been translated as "initiation," "consecration," and even "empowerment." None of these is a literal translation of the original term, which in fact means "sprinkling" or "watering"—specifically, sprinkling water on an area of earth, such as a field.

We can begin to learn something about the nature of Vajrayana initiation if we consider why the term *abhisheka* was chosen for this ritual. The answer is that we have here a ceremony the purpose of which is to enliven or quicken the disciple's

progress toward enlightenment. Just as we might sprinkle water on a field in which seeds have been sown, and by that sprinkling enliven and quicken the growth of the seeds, so in the Vajrayana initiation we enliven and quicken the growth of the seed of the disciple's spiritual potential.

We have here references to ideas that are already well developed in the Mahayana tradition—namely, the notion of the Buddha nature, or the potential for enlightenment, that all living beings possess. The process of growth and fruition of this spiritual potential is quickened by *abhisheka*, or "sprinkling"—a clear indication of the function of that sprinkling, or initiation. Although it is inconvenient to translate *abhisheka* as "watering" or "sprinkling," it is important to remember that the term refers to a process rather different in its purpose and intention from what we might think if we took it at face value, regarding it as a sort of initiation into a secret society or the like.

Let me try to expand on this very fundamental and linguistic definition of initiation in the Vajrayana tradition. Vajrayana initiation means introducing the disciple into the *mandala*, the sacred or magic circle, of one of the tutelary deities of the Vajrayana pantheon—deities who are special esoteric forms of the Buddha, meditation on whom can bring about enlightenment. In Chapter 27, we saw that the *mandala* is a symbolic representation of the universe. In the context of an initiation, it represents not the universe as we know it, from an unenlightened point of view, but the sacred or pure universe that we achieve on the level of enlightenment, when our vision is purified of unwholesome tendencies. Much of what I said in Chapter 26 about the transformation of the five aggregates into the five celestial Buddhas is applicable to this notion of the purified or transformed universe. Therefore, when we say that the Vajrayana initiation introduces a disciple into the *mandala* of one of the tantric tutelary deities, what we mean is that it introduces him or her to the purified

universe of one of these deities.

The Vajrayana tutelary deities can be divided into four classes of ascending power or efficacy in bringing about the transformation from an unenlightened mode of existence to an enlightened and sacred mode of existence: (1) the *kriya* class, (2) the *charya* class, (3) the *yoga* class, and (4) the *anuttarayoga* class. Initiation is the introduction of a disciple into the sacred universe of the tutelary deity of one of these classes of tantra. The *kriya* class refers to a group of tutelary deities and practices primarily concerned with externalized rituals and practices. *Kriya* means "action," "ritual," "ceremony." The tutelary deities who belong to this class are associated with practices that are, by and large, external and ritualistic. Practices associated with the *kriya* class of tantra often involve vegetarianism, regular and even ritual bathing, and ritual offering.

In contrast, the tutelary deities of the *charya* class of tantra are associated with practices that have to do primarily with the internal attitudes, intentions, and conceptions of the practitioner. Whereas *kriya* tantra practices are external, the practices associated with the *charya* tantra class are usually internal, to the exclusion of the external practices. Practitioners of the *charya* class often present a much less sociable appearance than those of the *kriya* class of tantra.

The third class, the *yoga* class of tutelary deities, is associated with a combination of practices belonging to the *kriya* and *charya* classes. Practices associated with the *yoga* class seek to arrive at a balance between the external and internal practices. This balance, or union, between the internal and external practices is reflected in the term *yoga*, which means "combination" or "union."

In the case of the *anuttarayoga* tutelary deities, we have a transcendence or dissolution of the barriers that define the first three classes of practice (external, internal, and the combination of the two). *Anuttara* means "transcendence," in this

case, a transcendence of external and internal practice alike. Thus the *anuttara* class of tutelary deities and practices is the most highly developed within the Vajrayana tradition. It is at this level that we achieve, in its fullest sense, complete integration of experience into the Vajrayana path, integration that leads spontaneously to the transformation of being. This is the ideal I referred to in Chapter 24, when discussing the purpose of the methodology of the Vajrayana—namely, complete integration of experience into the path.

Initiation itself can be of three varieties. The first of these is the major initiation, which has a kind of comprehensive, all-encompassing function. To use a rather prosaic analogy, a major initiation might be likened to a license empowering you to drive all kinds of motor vehicles, or to the broad powers that a government might give a special envoy to take up all decisions regarding a particular set of questions. A major initiation is a kind of complete empowerment that usually requires two days. The first day is given over to preparatory practices, which in general have to do with the purification of the disciple. The second day is reserved for actually introducing the disciple into the *mandala* of the particular deity involved.

The second kind of initiation is the subsidiary initiation, which might be likened to a license that empowers you to handle a rare, specialized class of practices, which are nonetheless important and highly efficacious.

The third class is even more limited in scope, consisting of rather simple initiations, often very brief in terms of the time required to bestow them, that enable one to engage in relatively simple practices associated with subsidiary deities belonging to a larger family to whom one has already been introduced by means of the appropriate initiation. These are sometimes termed "subsequent initiations," because they are traditionally given subsequent to major or subsidiary ones.

Vajrayana deities are also divided into families (not related to the four classes of

tutelary deities mentioned a moment ago) that are associated with the Buddhas of the Five Families—Vairochana, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi, and Akshobhya. For example, the tutelary deity Hevajra is associated with the Vajra family headed by Akshobhya, while Chakrasamvara is associated with the Buddha family of Vairochana.

A major initiation can be likened to the purchase of a season ticket for a whole series of events. The season ticket entitles you to participate in any or all of the events, although whenever you do you will naturally have to produce your ticket and perhaps have it stamped. Similarly, a major initiation entitles you to receive a whole series of subsidiary and lesser initiations, although, when receiving each initiation, you will still have to participate in the appropriate ritual.

Traditionally, it is the major initiation that provides the disciple with access to the whole range of Vajrayana deities and practices. In recent years, however, because of the growing demand for tantric initiations, Vajrayana masters sometimes choose to give one of the lesser, subsequent initiations first, since the practices associated with them are simpler. This has sometimes been found to be useful, in that it serves as a kind of trial exposure to Vajrayana practice, just as one might be given a license to drive a motor scooter before obtaining a license to drive all kinds of motor vehicles.

All these initiations must be given by a qualified Vajrayana preceptor. There are two types of qualification the preceptor may have. In the first case the preceptor, having achieved a very high level of mental development, receives direct empowerment from the deity concerned. This type of qualification is typified by the cases of the men of great attainment, or Mahasiddhas, in India, and also, less commonly, in Tibet.

The second type of qualification is much more common. In this case the

preceptor receives the empowerment of the deity from a qualified master. He or she must also perform the required meditational practices—the retreats and so forth—stipulated by the tradition, so as to secure a sufficiently intimate association with the deity to function as a go-between with the power to introduce others to the *mandala* of the deity concerned. It is important that the Vajrayana initiation be received from a preceptor who has at least the second type of qualification.

In the course of the Vajrayana initiation, the disciple regards the preceptor as identical with the tutelary deity into whose sacred circle he is being introduced. Similarly, he regards the environment, the situation of the initiation, as identical with the sacred universe of that tutelary deity. In the course of the initiation, he is introduced to and identifies both with that tutelary deity (in the form of the preceptor in the initiation) and with the sacred universe, which is symbolized by the situation of the initiation itself.

This process of introduction and identification takes place through the use of symbols. These symbols are both specific and general. The specific symbols are best represented by a variety of ritual objects. These ritual objects are associated with, and stand for, the elements or actors who participate in this sacred drama, who inhabit this sacred universe. In our discussions of the symbols of the Vajrayana and of the five archetypal Buddhas of the Five Families, we spoke of a number of symbols that have particular meanings (see Chapters 25 and 26). We spoke of the five Buddha families being represented by symbols such as the vajra, the crown, the bell, and so forth. In the Vajrayana initiation, these objects function as specific symbols by means of which the disciple can be introduced to the sacred universe and then identify himself with that sacred universe, that pure experience of an enlightened mode of being. In the course of the initiation, the disciple is given a vajra and bell to hold, a crown to wear, and so forth. These symbolic actions function to bring about (a) the

introduction of the disciple to the sacred universe, and (b) an identification of the disciple with that sacred universe.

In addition to these specific symbolic objects, there are also the more general and dynamic symbols of identification. These are the symbols of light and water, which we also encountered in our discussion of Vajrayana symbolism (see Chapter 25). In the course of the initiation, light and water are used as a way of identifying the disciple with the tutelary deity and with the sacred universe. Light is used as a medium for identifying the disciple with the preceptor, who, in the context of the initiation, is identical with the tutelary deity. Similarly, water is used as a symbol for identifying the disciple with the various levels of understanding of the sacred universe. In the initiation, both light and water form a kind of bridge by means of which the two initially different modes of being—namely, the distinction between the disciple and the preceptor in the form of the tutelary deity, and that between the experience of the disciple and the experience of the sacred universe—are identified and made one. The disciple is asked to participate in the process by visualizing light and water as media of identification with the purified universe portrayed in the Vajrayana initiation.

The initiation is a vehicle for transformation or, to put it more crudely, for rebirth, or regeneration. This is indicated by the fact that in a major initiation the disciple is given a new name, just as a new name is given when one becomes a Buddhist in the ceremony of the taking of refuge, or when one is ordained. The bestowal of the new name stands for the regeneration of the disciple in a new form, by virtue of his introduction to and identification with both the form of the tutelary deity and the experience of the sacred universe.

The initiation is important not only because it is itself an introduction to and identification with the sacred universe, but also because it supplies the disciple with

the methods, or keys, with which he can later reintroduce, re-identify, and reintegrate himself with the sacred universe first encountered during the initiation. These methods or keys are (i) the vision with which he is supplied in the context of the initiation, when he sees for the first time, in symbolic form, the sacred and purified universe; and (ii) the mantra appropriate to the tutelary deity that he is given in the course of the initiation.

By means of this vision and this mantra, the disciple can recreate the sacred vision, reintroduce himself to the sacred experience, and re-identify himself with the sacred universe. This will occur subsequent to the initiation, in the practice of the meditation appropriate to the particular tutelary deity whose initiation the disciple has received. In the context of this meditation, he will use the keys received during the initiation—the vision and the mantra—to recreate, reintroduce, and re-identify himself with the sacred experience on his own. He will then no longer need the support, the external environment, of the initiation. Rather, he will be able to recreate, reintroduce, and re-identify himself with the pure experience represented by the initiation by means of the elements he received there. This is the primary role and function of the Vajrayana initiation.

Like other initiations, the Vajrayana initiation brings with it certain commitments that must be respected and preserved by the disciple. Prosaic cases, such as licensing to drive motor vehicles or to practice medicine, also bring with them a commitment to respect certain codes or rules of action and intention. Similarly, in the Buddhist tradition as a whole, rites such as taking refuge and ordination into the monastic order bring with them certain commitments the disciple is expected to fulfill.

In very general terms, there are three sets of commitments in the Buddhist tradition—those appropriate for individual liberation (the *pratimoksha* vows), those

appropriate for the resolve to liberate all living beings (the Bodhisattva vows), and those appropriate to Vajrayana practice (the Vajrayana vows). In brief, the essential quality of the commitments appropriate for individual liberation is the avoidance of injury to others; the essential quality of the commitments of the Bodhisattva is to benefit others; and the essential quality of the Vajrayana commitments is to regard all living beings as part of the pure vision, as deities of the sacred universe which the disciple has appropriated through the Vajrayana initiation.

Chapter Twenty-Nine
Vajrayana Buddhism in Practice

In the last of these eight chapters on the Vajrayana path, I would like to consider the special meditational practice known as the Vajrayana Sadhana. The term *sadhana* means "to achieve," "to attain," or "to establish." The Vajrayana Sadhana is the means by which one can achieve, attain, or establish the experience of the sacred universe, the experience of enlightenment. One who engages in the practice of *sadhana* is called a *sadhaka*. The attainment itself is called the *siddhi*, and one who has attained it is called a *siddha*. I mention this because in Chapter 22 I talked about the men of great attainment, or Mahasiddhas, who attained the experience of enlightenment through the practice of Vajrayana meditation, or *sadhana*.

In Chapter 28 we said that, in the Vajrayana initiation, the practitioner is given the keys with which to enter and experience the sacred universe. In general, the keys that are given are the vision of the tutelary deity and the special verbal formula, or mantra, associated with the tutelary deity. These constitute important elements in Vajrayana meditation, the purpose of which is the recreation and establishment of the sacred universe. But if we are to understand how the practice of Vajrayana meditation enables the practitioner to obtain this enlightenment experience, we need to consider the general form and contents of Vajrayana meditation.

In explaining the practice of Vajrayana meditation, I will use a structure that is not absolutely universal. You will encounter a number of practices that do not conform in every particular to the pattern that I will use here: they may differ in the

order of their elements, or be presented in a slightly different way. In broad terms, however, the elements of this structure are present in virtually all forms of Vajrayana meditation. Moreover, the interpretation that I will elaborate on is based on authoritative expositions in the commentarial literature of the Vajrayana tradition.

One other general point I would like to stress is that Vajrayana meditation is both method (or path) and goal (or result). What I mean by method is that, by practicing Vajrayana meditation, one can attain the experience of enlightenment. In this sense Vajrayana meditation is method. But as one progresses in one's practice of the meditation, as one perfects the method, the method becomes the goal. Thus at one level Vajrayana meditation is method, but as the practitioner perfects the method, the meditation becomes the goal. It remains the method only in relation to other, less developed individuals.

Let me try to explain this by introducing the general interpretation of Vajrayana meditation that I propose to adopt—namely, that Vajrayana meditation is a paradigm, a reenactment, an imitation, or a replica of the careers of the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas. The careers of the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas are both method and goal. As the Bodhisattva progresses along the Bodhisattva path, for him that path is method. Once he achieves Buddhahood, the Bodhisattva path and the career of the Buddha become the goal for him, even though, in relation to other living beings, they are still method. For example, as we saw in Chapter 15, in the context of the Mahayana, the career of the Buddha—his birth, his renunciation of household life, his practice of austerities, and his achievement of Buddhahood—was simply a drama played out for the enlightenment of sentient beings.

As one progresses along the path, the method and the goal become indistinguishable. The practice becomes the goal for the practitioner, yet it remains the method for others, who still have to be led to Buddhahood. The Vajrayana

meditation, therefore, is both method and goal—depending on one's place along the path, on the level of one's understanding and attainment.

Let us divide the Vajrayana meditation into two parts, each of which can in turn be divided into two subsections. To achieve Buddhahood, one has to perfect the accomplishments of merit and knowledge, the two prerequisites which are indispensable for achieving Buddhahood. Practice of the perfections of giving, good conduct, and patience results in the accomplishment of merit, while the perfections of meditation and wisdom result in the accomplishment of knowledge. Energy, the fourth perfection, is needed for both accomplishments.

The first half of the Vajrayana practice is an imitation—an internalized, contemplative, symbolic expression—of the Bodhisattva path through which merit and knowledge are perfected. Vajrayana meditation begins with the taking of refuge. It continues, in most cases, with awakening of the enlightenment thought and recollection of the practices of the Six Perfections and Four Immeasurables (love, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity). All these practices are internalized, meditative, symbolic expressions of the Bodhisattva's accumulation of merit.

As we look further into the contents of the Vajrayana Sadhana, we come next to the meditation on emptiness. This is nothing other than an internalized, symbolic expression of the Bodhisattva's accomplishment of knowledge. The Bodhisattva achieves knowledge through the perfection of meditation and the perfection of wisdom. Here, then we have the meditation on emptiness, a union of meditation and wisdom.

Thus far, we have considered the first half of the Vajrayana meditation, which corresponds to the career of the Bodhisattva up to his attainment of Buddhahood, with his two accomplishments of merit and of knowledge. These are represented symbolically by the taking of refuge, the awakening of the enlightenment thought,

the practice of the Four Immeasurables, and the meditation on emptiness.

After the attainment of enlightenment, once Buddhahood is achieved, the accomplishments of merit and knowledge result in two fruits. These two fruits are the two dimensions of Buddhahood—the form dimension and the transcendental dimension—which arise directly from the accomplishments of merit and knowledge. In the second half of the Vajrayana Sadhana, we have a symbolic, meditative paradigmatic expression, or replica, of the reality of Buddhahood that includes these two dimensions. This is represented in the *sadhana* through the use of the notion of two processes: (1) the process of creation, origination, or production, and (2) the process of completion, or perfection. These two processes correspond to the form and transcendental dimensions of Buddhahood, respectively.

In what way are these processes of creation and completion reflected symbolically—replicated in meditative experience—in the context of the Vajrayana meditation? Following the symbolic attainment of Buddhahood, we have visualization of the form of the tutelary deity, in other words, the creation of the phenomenal dimension of Buddhahood in the shape of the particular tutelary deity to which the meditation belongs. The practitioner creates a conscious imitation of the phenomenal dimension of Buddhahood in the form of the tutelary deity in question. In addition, we have the recitation of the mantra of that deity. This recitation is a symbolic, internalized, meditative imitation of the Buddha's teaching of the Dharma. These two components—the creation of the form of the tutelary deity, and the recitation of the mantra—constitute the process of creation. They correspond to the form dimension of Buddhahood, and are an imitation of the phenomenal activities of the Buddha.

These practices of the creation of the form of the deity and the recitation of the mantra are followed by a dissolution of the form of the deity into emptiness and a

cessation of the recitation of the mantra. This dissolution and cessation is a symbolic, meditative replica of the transcendental dimension of Buddhahood.

In the second half of the Vajrayana meditation, therefore, we have an imitation of the activities or career of the Buddha, with its phenomenal and transcendental dimensions of Buddhahood. This imitation is achieved through use of the conceptions of the processes of creation and completion. The process of creation constitutes the visualization of the deity and the recitation of the mantra, which are paradigmatic of the Buddha's phenomenal dimension—his activities and teaching of the Dharma, respectively. The process of completion constitutes the dissolution of the deity and a cessation of the recitation of the mantra, which is paradigmatic of the Buddha's transcendental dimension.

In summary, in the Vajrayana meditation we have a complete replica or imitation of the careers of the Bodhisattvas and the Buddhas. The first part of the meditation is a replica of the Bodhisattva's accomplishment of merit and knowledge. The second part is a replica of the Buddha's phenomenal and transcendental dimensions.

I would like to return to the notion of meditation and wisdom. This point serves to emphasize the complete integrity of Buddhism, because it is absolutely characteristic of all the Buddhist traditions to insist on a fusion of concentration and insight, a union of tranquillity and penetrative vision or wisdom. In the context of the Vajrayana meditation, too, this union is essential. As the practitioner meditates on emptiness in the context of the imitation of the Bodhisattva's accomplishment of knowledge, he or she must unite meditation and wisdom. In this case, his or her ability to concentrate the mind on an object is applied to the understanding of emptiness. Whereas formerly he or she may have cultivated the ability to concentrate his or her mind with the help of an external support, such as a blue disk, here, in the

context of the Vajrayana meditation, he or she focuses directly on the understanding of emptiness. In that way, through the meditation on emptiness, he or she imitates the Bodhisattva's accomplishment of knowledge through cultivation of the perfections of meditation and wisdom.

There must also be a union of meditation and wisdom in the context of visualizing the tutelary deity and reciting the mantra. Here the objects of concentration are the visualized form of the tutelary deity and the sound of the mantra, but the practitioner has to integrate his or her understanding of emptiness with his or her concentration on the form of the tutelary deity and the sound of the mantra so that, in the course of the visualization and recitation, he or she regards the visualization and the sound of the mantra as exemplary of empty phenomena—as similar to a reflection, a magical illusion, and an echo. This is the case because, just as a reflection or an echo occurs relative to causes and conditions, so the visualization of the tutelary deity and the sound of the mantra arise and exist relative to causes and conditions.

In the context of the Vajrayana meditation, the visualization and the recitation are also paradigmatic of interdependently originated phenomena and of emptiness, respectively. In the Vajrayana meditation, as in the other Buddhist traditions of mental development, the union of meditation and wisdom is absolutely necessary. This is perhaps why Nagarjuna said in his Letter to a Friend (Suhrillekha) that without meditation there is no wisdom, and without wisdom there is no meditation. But for the practitioner who puts meditation and wisdom together, the whole ocean of samsara can be dried up, just as water that gathers in a cow's hoof print in the mud is dried up by the noonday sun.

By putting meditation and wisdom together in the context of the Vajrayana meditation, one can achieve the experience of the sacred universe, the experience of

Buddhahood. This is achieved gradually, through familiarization with and appropriation of the sacred universe depicted in the *sadhana,* which is an internalized, meditative microcosm of the careers of the Bodhisattvas and the Buddhas. In this way, one can achieve the goal of Buddhahood. Thereupon, one's experience of enlightenment becomes a means of leading other sentient beings to the same sacred universe, the same goal.

Part Four

The Abhidharma

Chapter Thirty
An Introduction to the Abhidharma

In Chapters 30 through 41, I will discuss the philosophical and psychological aspects of Buddhism presented in the seven books of the *Abhidharma Pitaka* of the Pali canon.

I will not look in great detail at the lists of factors, or *dharmas,* found in many competent books on the Abhidharma. Instead, my objectives here are three: (1) to outline and describe the principal methods and characteristics of the Abhidharma, (2) to relate the Abhidharma to what we generally know about the teachings of the Buddha, and (3) to relate Abhidharma philosophy to our situation as lay Buddhists.

Throughout the history of Buddhism, the Abhidharma has been held in high esteem. In the books of the Pali canon, for example, the Abhidharma is spoken of in terms of praise and special regard. There the Abhidharma is the special domain of the elder monks; novices are even asked not to interrupt the Elders when they are engaged in a discussion of the Abhidharma. We also find the Abhidharma recommended only for those who sincerely strive to realize the goal of Buddhist practice, and that a knowledge of it is recommended for teachers of the Dharma.

This traditional regard for the Abhidharma is found not only in the Theravada tradition but in other major Buddhist traditions as well. For instance, Kumarajiva, the great Central Asian translator renowned for his translation of Madhyamaka works into Chinese, is said to have firmly believed that he must introduce the Abhidharma to the Chinese if he wished to teach them Buddhist philosophy. In the Tibetan

tradition, also, the Abhidharma is an important part of monastic training.

Why is the Abhidharma held in such high esteem? The basic reason is that a knowledge of the Abhidharma, in the general sense of understanding the ultimate teaching, is absolutely necessary to achieve wisdom, which is in turn necessary to achieve freedom. No matter how long one meditates or how virtuous a life one leads, without insight into the real nature of things, one cannot achieve freedom.

A knowledge of the Abhidharma is necessary in order to apply the insight into impermanence, impersonality, and insubstantiality that we gain from a reading of the *Sutra Pitaka* to every experience of daily life. All of us may glimpse impermanence, impersonality, and insubstantiality through reading the *Sutra Pitaka,* but how often can we apply that momentary intellectual truth to our daily existence? The system in the Abhidharma teaching provides a mechanism for doing so. A study of the Abhidharma is therefore extremely useful for our practice.

Let us consider the origin and authenticity of the Abhidharma. The Theravada school holds that the Buddha is the source of the Abhidharma philosophy and was himself the first master of the Abhidharma because, on the night of his enlightenment, he penetrated the essence of the Abhidharma. According to a traditional account, the Buddha also spent the fourth week after his enlightenment in meditation on the Abhidharma. This is the week known as "the House of Gems." Later in his career, it is said that the Buddha visited the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, where his mother was, and taught the Abhidharma to her and the gods. It is said that when he returned to earth, he passed on the essentials of what he had taught to Sariputta—hardly a coincidence, since Sariputta was his foremost disciple, renowned for his wisdom.

Thus it is claimed in general that it is the Buddha to whom we owe the inspiration of the Abhidharma teaching. This inspiration was passed on to his

disciples who were philosophically gifted, like Sariputta, and by the effort of these gifted disciples the general outline and contents of Abhidharma philosophy were established.

Let us go on to consider the meaning of the term *abhidharma*. If we look carefully at the *Sutra Pitaka,* we find this term occurring frequently, usually in the general sense of "meditation about Dharma," "instruction about Dharma," or "discussion about Dharma." In a more specific sense, *abhidharma* means "special Dharma," "higher Dharma," or "further Dharma." Here, of course, we are using *Dharma* in the sense of doctrine or teaching, not in the sense of phenomenon or factor of experience (in which case it would not be capitalized).

There is an even more technical sense in which the term *abhidharma* is used in the *Sutra Pitaka,* and in this context *dharma* no longer means doctrine in general but, rather, phenomenon. This technical use is associated with another function, that is to make distinctions. This most technical use of the term *abhidharma* has five aspects, or meanings: (a) to define dharmas; (b) to ascertain the relationship between dharmas; (c) to analyze dharmas; (d) to classify dharmas, and (e) to arrange dharmas in numerical order.

The Buddhist canon is divided into three collections (literally, "baskets"): the *Sutra Pitaka,* the *Vinaya Pitaka,* and the *Abhidharma Pitaka.* The *Sutra Pitaka* is ordinarily termed the basket of the discourses, the *Vinaya Pitaka* contains the rules covering the monastic community, and the *Abhidharma Pitaka* is normally referred to as the books of Buddhist philosophy and psychology. Here I would like to look at the relationship between the *Abhidharma Pitaka* and the *Sutra Pitaka.* There is a great deal of Abhidharmic material in the *Sutra Pitaka.* Remember the technical definition of *abhidharma* that we considered a moment ago. Keeping that in mind, we find in the *Sutra Pitaka* a number of discourses that are Abhidharmic in character:

the *Anguttara Nikaya,* which presents an exposition of teachings arranged in numerical order; the *Sangiti Sutta* and *Dasuttara Sutta,* in which Sariputta expounds on items of the teachings arranged in numerical order; and the *Anupada Sutta,* a discourse in which Sariputta analyzes his meditative experience in Abhidharmic terms.

How, then, can we arrive at a distinction between the Abhidharma and the sutras? To do this we need to look at the second meaning of the term *abhidharma,* namely, its use in the sense of "higher doctrine." In the sutras the Buddha speaks from two points of view. First he speaks of beings, objects, the qualities and possessions of beings, the world, and the like, and he is often found making statements such as "I myself will go to Uruvela." Second, the Buddha proclaims in no uncertain terms that there is no "I" and that all things are devoid of personality, substance, and so forth.

Obviously, the two standpoints in operation here are the conventional (*vohara*) and the ultimate (*paramattha*). We have everyday language like "you" and "I," and we also have technical philosophical language that does not assume personality, objects, and so forth. This is the difference between the Sutric contents and the Abhidharmic contents of the teachings of the Buddha. By and large, the sutras use the conventional standpoint while the Abhidharma uses the ultimate standpoint. Yet there are passages in the sutras that describe impermanence, impersonality or insubstantiality, elements, and aggregates, and hence reflect the ultimate standpoint. In this context there is also a division of texts into those whose meaning is explicit and direct, and those whose meaning is implicit and indirect.

Why did the Buddha resort to these two standpoints, the conventional and the ultimate? For the answer we need to look at his excellence as a teacher and skill in choosing methods of teaching. If the Buddha had spoken to all his audiences only in

terms of impermanence, insubstantiality, elements, and aggregates, I do not think the Buddhist community would have grown as quickly as it did during the sixth century B.C.E. At the same time, the Buddha knew that the ultimate standpoint is indispensable for a profound understanding of the Dharma, so his teachings do contain specific language for expressing the ultimate standpoint.

Chapter Thirty-One
Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma

One of the functions of the Abhidharma is definition. Definition is important because, to successfully communicate about a rather technical subject, we must know precisely what our terms mean. Thus I would like to look at a number of terms used frequently and popularly in speaking about Buddhist thought. I would like to arrive at an understanding of the definitions of these terms and then relate them to the nature of the teachings of the Buddha.

Buddhism has often been called a religion, a philosophy, and, in recent years, a psychology. "Religion" refers to belief in, or recognition of, a higher, unseen power that controls the course of the universe. Moreover, religion has an emotional and moral component and has to do with rituals and worship. Because Buddhism does not recognize the existence of such a power and does not universally emphasize rituals and worship, it is difficult to categorize Buddhism in general—and particularly the Abhidharma—as a religion.

In its original sense, "philosophy" means the "love of wisdom and knowledge." More generally, it means investigation of the nature of the laws or causes of all being. This definition might apply to Buddhism except that it remains somewhat vague, due to the various meanings of the words "nature" and "being." This has led to two approaches in philosophical thinking, called metaphysics and phenomenology. Metaphysics is the study of absolute or first principles. It is also sometimes called the science of ontology, which means the study of essences or, in simple terms, the study

of things in themselves. Phenomenology, in contrast, is the description of things as they are experienced by the individual; it is the science of epistemology, the study of things as they are known, as they appear to us. Insofar as Buddhism is philosophical, it is concerned primarily with phenomenology.

"Psychology" is the study of the mind and mental states. Like philosophy, it has two aspects—pure psychology, which is the general study of mental phenomena, and psychotherapy, or applied psychology, which is the application of the study of mental phenomena to the problem of disease and cure, disturbance and adjustment. We might explain the difference between pure and applied psychology by means of an analogy. Imagine that a man climbs to the top of a hill and surveys the countryside without any particular purpose in mind. His survey will take in every detail—the hills, the woods, the rivers and streams—without discrimination. But if he has a purpose in mind—for instance, if he intends to reach another hilltop in the distance—then his survey will focus on the particular features that will help or hinder him in his progress toward that goal. When we speak of applied psychology or psychotherapy, we mean a study of the mind and mental states that focuses on those phenomena that will help or hinder one's progress toward mental well-being.

Having looked briefly at the definitions of religion, philosophy, and psychology, we can begin to see that the phenomenological aspect of philosophy and the therapeutic aspect of psychology relate best to an understanding of the Buddha's teaching.

The Abhidharma, like Buddhist thought in general, is highly rational and logical. If we look closely at the methods of exposition and argument in the Abhidharma, we find the beginning of dialectics, which is the science of debate, and also the beginning of logical argument and analysis. This is particularly evident in the fourfold classification of the nature of questions. It is said that familiarity with

and ability to use this classification is indispensable for anyone who wants to engage fruitfully in discussion and debate about the Dharma, because to answer a question correctly, one has to understand the nature of the question.

The first class of questions is the most direct and refers to those that can be answered directly and categorically, such as "Do all living beings die?" To this the answer is "Yes, all living beings die."

The second class can only be answered with qualifications, for instance, "Will all living beings be reborn?" This kind of question cannot be answered directly and categorically because it has two possible interpretations. Thus it must be analyzed and answered individually, taking into account each of the possible meanings: "Living beings who are not free from the afflictions will be reborn, but those who are free from the afflictions, like the Arhats, will not be reborn."

The third class of questions must be answered with counter-questions, as, for instance, "Is man powerful?" Here the reference point of the question must be determined before the question can be answered: in other words, is man powerful with reference to the gods or to animals? If the former, then man is not powerful; if the latter, then man is powerful. The aim of the counter-question is to determine the reference point that the questioner has in mind.

The fourth class of questions are those in which we are particularly interested here. These are questions that do not deserve an answer; the famous inexpressible propositions to which the Buddha remained silent fall into this category. Traditionally, there are fourteen unanswerable questions. We find them, for instance, in the *Chulamalunkya Sutta*. These fourteen questions are grouped into three categories:

The first category contains eight questions that concern the absolute or final nature of the world: Is the world eternal or not eternal, or both or neither; finite or

not finite, or both or neither? You can see that this category includes two sets of questions, and that both sets refer to the world. The first set refers to the existence of the world in time, and the second to the existence of the world in space.

The second category contains four questions: Does the Tathagata exist after death or not, or both or neither? These questions refer to the nature of nirvana, or ultimate reality.

The third category contains two questions: Is the self identical with or different from the body? While the first category of questions refers to the world and the second to what is beyond the world, this last refers to personal experience. Do we die with our bodies, or are our personalities altogether different from and independent of our bodies?

The Buddha remained silent when asked these fourteen questions. He described them as a net and refused to be drawn into such a net of theories, speculations, and dogmas. He said that it was because he was free of the bondage of all theories and dogmas that he had attained liberation. Such speculations, he said, are attended by fever, unease, bewilderment, and suffering, and it is by freeing oneself of them that one achieves liberation.

Let us look at the fourteen questions in general to see whether we can understand why the Buddha took this stand. Generally, the fourteen questions imply two basic attitudes toward the world. The Buddha spoke of these two attitudes in his dialogue with Maha Kachchayana, when he said that there are two basic views, the view of existence and the view of nonexistence. He said that people are accustomed to think in these terms, and that as long as they remain entangled in these two views they will not attain liberation. The propositions that the world is eternal, that the world is infinite, that the Tathagatha exists after death, and that the self is independent of the body reflect the view of existence. The propositions that the

world is not eternal, that the world is finite, that the Tathagata does not exist after death, and that the self is identical with the body reflect the view of nonexistence.

These two views were professed by teachers of other schools during the time of the Buddha. The view of existence is generally the view of the Brahmins; that of nonexistence is generally the view of the materialists and hedonists. When the Buddha refused to be drawn into the net of these dogmatic views of existence and nonexistence, I think he had two things in mind: (1) the ethical consequences of these two views, and, more importantly, (2) the fact that the views of absolute existence and nonexistence do not correspond to the way things really are.

For example, the eternalists view this self as permanent and unchanging. When the body dies, this self will not die because the self is by nature unchanging. If that is the case, it does not matter what this body does: actions of the body will not affect the destiny of the self. This view is incompatible with moral responsibility because if the self is eternal and unchanging, it will not be affected by wholesome and unwholesome actions. Similarly, if the self were identical with the body and the self dies along with the body, then it does not matter what the body does. If you believe that existence ends at death, there will be no constraint upon action. But in a situation where things exist through interdependent origination, absolute existence and nonexistence are impossible.

Another example drawn from the fourteen unanswerable questions also shows that the propositions do not correspond to the way things really are. Take the example of the world. The world does not exist absolutely or not exist absolutely in time. The world exists dependent on causes and conditions—ignorance, craving, and clinging. When ignorance, craving, and clinging are present, the world exists; when they are not present, the world ceases to exist. Hence the question of the absolute existence or nonexistence of the world is unanswerable.

The same may be said of the other categories of questions that make up the fourteen unanswerables. Existence and nonexistence, taken as absolute ideas, do not apply to things as they really are. This is why the Buddha refused to agree to absolute statements about the nature of things. He saw that the absolute categories of metaphysics do not apply to things as they really are.

As for the Buddha's attitude toward psychology, there is no doubt that he placed a great deal of emphasis on the role of the mind. We are familiar with the famous verses in the *Dhammapada* where the Buddha speaks of the mind as the forerunner of all mental states. The text says that happiness and suffering result from acting with a pure mind and an impure mind, respectively. We need only look at the canonical texts to recognize the importance of mind in Buddhist teachings. There we find the five aggregates, four out of five of which are mental, and the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment, the majority of which are mental. No matter where we look, we will be struck by the importance of mind in the teachings of the Buddha.

Various religions and philosophies have their particular starting points. The theistic religions begin with God. Ethical teachings like Confucianism begin with man as a social entity. Buddhism begins with the mind. It is therefore not surprising that we often choose to describe the Buddha's teaching as a psychological one, and that we also describe it as psychotherapy, since the symbolism of disease and cure is prominent in the teaching of the Buddha. The Four Noble Truths are a reflection of the ancient scheme of disease, diagnosis, cure, and treatment used in early medical science, and we might also recall that the Buddha was called the king of physicians.

The Buddha was interested in cure, not in metaphysical categories. We find his use of various techniques of cure throughout the discourses in the *Sutra Pitaka*. For instance, take the Buddha's teaching about the self. In the *Dhammapada* the Buddha taught that the wise man can attain happiness by disciplining himself, and yet in

other places in the discourses, we find the Buddha expounding the doctrine of not-self, the idea that nowhere in the psycho-physical components of experience is the permanent self to be found.

For the explanation of this apparent contradiction, we need to look at the Buddha's dialogue with Vachchhagotta, who asked the Buddha whether or not the self existed. The Buddha remained silent, and after a time Vachchhagotta left. Ananda, who happened to be nearby, asked the Buddha why he had not replied. The Buddha explained that if he had said that the self existed, he would have been siding with those Brahmins who believed in the absolute existence of the self, but if he had told Vachchhagotta that the self did not exist, it would have been confusing for Vachchhagotta, who would have thought, "Previously I had a self, but now I no longer have one." The Buddha chose to remain silent because he knew Vachchhagotta's predicament. Similarly, when confronted by those who did not believe in rebirth, he taught the existence of the self, whereas to those who believed in the reality of karma, in the fruit of good and bad actions, he taught the doctrine of not-self. This is the Buddha's skill in the means of instruction.

We can see how this ties in with the Buddha's rejection of absolute categories when we look at his use of the symbol of the water-snake. Here we find the Buddha saying that the factors of experience are similar to a water-snake. When a person capable of handling a water-snake and knowledgeable in the method of capturing one attempts to catch one, he will do so successfully. But when a person unaccustomed to handling a water-snake and ignorant of how to capture one attempts it, his attempt will end in lamentation and pain. Similarly, phenomena—the factors of experience—are nothing in themselves. They are not absolutely existent or absolutely nonexistent, neither absolutely good nor absolutely bad; rather, they are relative. Whether they result in happiness or pain, in progress along the path or in

retrogression, depends not on the phenomena themselves but on how we handle them.

If things are handled in the right way, through a conscious and deliberate adjustment of the mind, phenomena can be used for one's progress along the path. A knife, for instance, is neither true nor false, yet someone who grasps it by the blade is surely in error. When we relate to phenomena in terms of craving, ill-will, and ignorance, this results in suffering. When we take them otherwise, this results in happiness.

To summarize, we can use terms like "philosophy" and "psychology" in relation to the Buddhist tradition as long as we remember that we are interested in philosophy not as it concerns essences and absolute categories but as a description of phenomena, and that we are interested in psychology insofar as it concerns psychotherapy. These qualities of the philosophy and psychology of the Abhidharma are unique in the history of human thought. Nowhere else, in the ancient or modern world, in Asia or the West, has such a phenomenology and psychotherapy evolved.

What is unique about Buddhist phenomenology and psychotherapy is its rejection of the idea of a permanent self and its affirmation of the possibility of liberation. In all other systems, even those of western philosophical phenomenology and psychotherapy, we find an inability to reject the idea of a permanent self—the very rejection so characteristic of the teaching of the Buddha and of the Abhidharma. And nowhere within modern psychology do we find that possibility of ultimate and absolute freedom so central to the teachings of Buddhism.

Chapter Thirty-Two
Methodology

In this chapter I will discuss the methods through which the Abhidharma investigates our personalities and our relations to the world around us.

There are two ways to depict a given person and his relation to the world around him: deductively and inductively. The rational or deductive method begins with an abstract idea and applies that idea to one's experience. The empirical or inductive method begins with the facts we encounter in experience; through observing and analyzing, interpreting and understanding these facts, we build up a picture of ourselves and the world around us. In short, the rational method begins with the abstract and tries to apply it to the concrete, whereas the inductive method begins with the concrete and builds up a picture of reality gradually and progressively.

The inductive method, which is the one used in the Abhidharmic system, is quite close to the method of science, except that in science the focus of the inductive process is outward and in the Abhidharmic system the focus is inward, on the mind. This is why the Abhidharmic method is sometimes called introspection or, to use a traditional term, meditation.

When we say that the Abhidharmic method is empirical and inductive, we mean that it has to do primarily with mental experience. Sometimes we say that meditation is like internal or mental microscopy: it is a way of investigating very closely the facts of experience. The Abhidharmic method of introspection yields results because it

manages, through meditation, to slow down mental processes to a point where we can see and understand them. In this respect there is a remarkable parallel between the Abhidharmic method and the scientific method. In science, when we want to find out how a certain transformation actually takes place, we slow down the process or speed it up. In Abhidharmic meditation, too, we can slow down mental processes so that we can see what is actually happening, or we can speed things up. If we could see our human life, from birth to death, within the space of five minutes, it would give us great insight into the nature of life. However, because this is usually not possible, we slow things down. This is the basis of Abhidharmic meditation.

The lists of mental factors and the like in the books of the Abhidharma may appear tedious and speculative at first glance, but in fact they are just the written form of the data we find in this very careful investigation of experience. Far from being speculative, the Abhidharma is the result of careful and close introspective analysis of experience. That said, you may question the use of studying the Abhidharma at all, thinking that it is surely more useful to sit in meditation and reproduce the Abhidharmic experience of reality in one's own meditation. This is true to the extent that, as in all aspects of Buddhist teaching, direct as well as indirect acquaintance is required.

With the Abhidharmic view of the elements, the picture we get when we analyze experience is certainly much more effective if it is a direct picture achieved through our own meditation. But even if it is an indirect picture gained through study, it is still of use to us, because when we sit down to meditate we will already have some intellectual acquaintance with the general outline of the picture we are trying to bring into focus. In this sense studying the Abhidharma can be useful in bringing about an indirect understanding of ourselves and the world around us in Abhidharmic terms.

There are two ways Abhidharmic investigation works: (1) through analysis, and (2) through synthesis, or relation. The basic structure of these two methods is given in the first and last books of the *Abhidharma Pitaka,* the *Dhammasangani (Classification of Factors)* and the *Patthana (Book of Causal Relations),* respectively. These are the two most important books of the Abhidharma. It is through the analytical method and the synthetic or relational method that the Abhidharma arrives at a basic understanding of not-self and emptiness.

Let us look first at the analytical method and then at the relational method; finally, we will combine the two, as, indeed, we must to reap the full benefit of the Abhidharmic method of investigation. In *The Questions of King Milinda* (*Milinda Panha),* it is said that the Buddha has accomplished a very difficult task: "If a man," Nagasena says in reply to King Milinda, "were to take a boat out to the sea, and if he were to take a handful of sea water and were then able to tell you that in it this much water is from the Ganges, this much from the Yamuna, and this much from the other great rivers of India, this would certainly be a very difficult thing to accomplish. In the same way, the Buddha has analyzed a single conscious moment of experience—for instance, the experience of seeing a form—into its various component parts: matter, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness."

Analysis is the dissection of an apparently unitary, homogeneous whole into its component parts. This analysis can be applied not only to the self, as we find in the analysis of personal experience, but also to external objects: just as we can break down the personality into the five aggregates, so we can break down external phenomena into their component parts. For example, we can break down a table into its legs, its top, and so forth, and, even further, into the molecules and atoms of various elements that compose the table.

The purpose of dissecting an apparent whole is to uproot attachment to internal

and external phenomena. Once we recognize that this apparently homogeneous self is really just a collection of components, our attachment to the notion of the self is weakened; similarly, once we realize that external phenomena are just collections of individual smaller components, our attachment to external objects is weakened. What do we have as a result of our analytical process? Internally, we are left with moments of consciousness; externally, we are left with atoms. If we consider the two together, we are left with elements, or factors of experience.

The mental and material elements of experience do not in themselves bring us to the ultimate understanding of reality because we are left with moments of consciousness and atoms of matter—elements of experience. These elements remain irreducible no matter how long and how far we go in our process of dissection. Although we come up with smaller and smaller parts, we are left with a picture of reality that is broken up into little bits and pieces as a result of dissection. This in itself is not an accurate and complete picture of reality.

To arrive at the ultimate picture of reality, we need to couple the analytical approach with the synthetic or relational approach. That is why a great Buddhist scholar and saint, Nagarjuna, once expressed his reverence for the Buddha as "the teacher of interdependent origination." The truth of interdependent origination pacifies and calms the agitation of thought-construction. This is an indication of the importance of relation, interdependence, or conditionality in understanding the real nature of things. It is also why scholars have focused on the *Book of Causal Relations,* which supplies the other half of the Abhidharmic method of investigation.

Just as, through analysis, we arrive at the insubstantiality of personality and phenomena (because we see that they are made up of component parts), so, through the process of relational investigation, we arrive at the emptiness of personality and phenomena (because we see that the component parts which constitute them are all

conditioned by and relative to each other). We arrive at this insubstantiality and emptiness by focusing on the teaching of interdependent origination.

We can see how, within a given thing—be it the personality or an external object—the component parts depend on one another for their existence. For instance, within a single phenomenon, such as an apparently unitary table, there are several component parts (the legs, the top, and so forth) that depend on each other for their existence as part of a table. Similarly, the table depends on its antecedent causes (the wood, the iron, and action of the craftsman who put it together) and also on proximate conditions (like the floor on which it stands).

We can also explore the idea of interdependence in relation to three dimensions: time, space, and karma. For instance, the table is dependent in terms of time in the sense that, prior to the table existing, a series of events occurred—the cutting of lumber, the construction of the table, and so forth. This sequence of events led to the arising of the table. Similarly, the table is dependent in terms of space in the sense that it stands on the floor, and so forth. The third dimension of conditionality operates beyond time and space. This dimension is explained by karma, because karma has its effects depending on time and space, yet it is not directly apparent in time and space. Because of karma, an action done at a very distant point in time and space can have its effects here and now. Conditionality is therefore not only temporal and spatial, but also has a karmic dimension.

Let us take two examples to establish more firmly what we mean by the analytical approach and the relational approach. Take a chariot, which is a phenomenon, an identifiable entity. We apply the analytical approach to the chariot by breaking it down into its component parts: the wheels, axle, body, shaft, and so forth. Application of the synthetic method looks at the same chariot in terms of the lumber that goes to it, the action of the builders who put it together, and so forth.

Alternatively, we can take the classical examples of the flame in an oil lamp, which exists dependent on the oil and the wick, and the sprout, which depends on a seed, soil, sunlight, and so forth.

The analytical and the relational methods together yield the ultimate picture of things as they really are. They yield this ultimate picture through careful investigation. We use the analytical method to break things up into the component parts of an apparent whole; then we use the relational method to show that these component parts do not exist independently and separately but depend on other factors for their existence.

There are many places in the Buddha's teaching where methods of investigation are used singly and then in combination. For example, we apply mindfulness first to internal phenomena, then to external phenomena, and finally both to internal and external phenomena. By using analysis and relation together, we overcome many problems. Not only do we overcome the idea of self, substance, and personality, we also overcome the problems that result if we believe in the independent existence of separate factors and ideas like existence and nonexistence, identity and difference.

The analytical and the synthetic approaches are actually reflected in the chemistry of the brain. Neurologists have discovered that the brain is divided into two hemispheres, one whose function is analytical and one whose function is synthetic. If these two functions are not in harmony, not in balance, personality disturbances result. Someone who is too analytical tends to overlook the more intuitive, dynamic, fluid aspects of life, while someone who is too relational tends to lack precision, clarity, and focus. Thus even in our personal lives we need to combine analytical and relational thinking.

The psychological and neurological dimensions of these two approaches are also clear in the development of western philosophy and science. Philosophies in which

the analytical approach is predominant have left us with realistic, pluralistic, and atomistic systems like the philosophy of Bertrand Russell. By the same token, in the latest developments of science, such as quantum theory, we find a more relational view of reality gaining ground. When we look at the history of philosophy and science in the West, we can see that each of these two approaches to investigation has been dominant at one time or another.

Perhaps we are reaching a point where we can combine the two even in western science and philosophy. Perhaps we can arrive at a view of reality not too different from the one that the Abhidharma arrives at through the experience of introspective meditation—a view of reality that is both analytical (in that it rejects the idea of a homogeneous whole) and relational (in that it rejects the idea of independent, separately existing bits and pieces of reality). We would then have a very fluid and open view of reality in which experience saturated by suffering could be dynamically transformed into experience free from all suffering.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE
Analysis of Consciousness

Because of its importance and scope, I will dedicate three chapters to the analysis of consciousness within Abhidharma philosophy. In this chapter I look at some of the systems for classifying consciousness and also at the sense-sphere consciousness in particular.

To understand why we begin our Abhidharmic analysis of experience with consciousness, it is important to remember the therapeutic concern of Buddhist philosophy in general and the Abhidharma in particular. The starting point of Buddhist thought is the truth of suffering. Suffering is a problem of consciousness; only that which is conscious can suffer. Consciousness is subject to suffering because of ignorance, or fundamental not-knowing, which divides consciousness into subject and object, into a self and an other-than-self (i.e., the objects and people around the self).

In Buddhism, ignorance is defined as the notion of a permanent, independent self and its object. Once we have this division of consciousness into a self and an other-than-self, we have suffering, because tension is created between the two. We also have craving and aversion, because we want those things that support the self and are averse to those things that are not conducive to the self.

This division or discrimination between the self (or subject) and the other-than-the-self (or object) is the fundamental cause of suffering. Such a division is possible because of ignorance—the belief in a real self existing independently and in

opposition to the other-than-self. Thus it is not surprising that the Abhidharma should turn first to an analysis of subjectivity and objectivity. Indeed, when we examine the teaching of the five aggregates, we see that form (*rupa*) is the objective component, while name (*nama*), consciousness, and the mental aggregates of volition, perception, and feeling are the subjective component.

Before looking at how this division affects the Abhidharmic analysis of consciousness, we must be clear about what it means. In Buddhism, this division does not mean that we have an essential, irreducible duality of mind and matter. Buddhism is not concerned with mind and matter as ultimate metaphysical facts but with mind and matter as they are experienced. Mind and matter are forms of experience, not essences. This is why Buddhism is a phenomenological, not an ontological, philosophy, and why the division of mind and matter in Buddhism is a phenomenological division.

There are two systems for classifying consciousness in the Abhidharma: objective and subjective. Objective classification refers to the objects of consciousness, while subjective classification refers to the nature of consciousness.

Objective classification primarily takes into account the direction in which consciousness is oriented. Within this objective scheme, there is a division into four classes of consciousness: (1) the sense-sphere consciousness, or consciousness directed toward the world of sense desire (*kamavachara*); (2) the consciousness directed toward the sphere of form (*rupavachara*); (3) the consciousness directed toward the formless sphere (*arupavachara*); and (4) the consciousness directed toward nirvana (*lokuttara*).

The first three classes of consciousness are worldly (*lokiya*) and are concerned with the world of conditioned things. The fourth class, also known as supramundane consciousness (*alokiya chitta*), refers to the transcendental direction of consciousness

(*lokuttara*) and is the consciousness of the four types of noble ones—the stream-winner, once-returner, non-returner, and liberated one (see Chapter 35).

The object of the *kamavachara* is material and limited; the object of the *rupavachara* is not material but is still limited; and the object of the *arupavachara* is not material and is unlimited. If we look at these three in order, we find (a) a material and limited object, (b) an immaterial but still limited object, and (c) an immaterial and unlimited object of consciousness. All three types of consciousness are directed toward mundane objects. There is a progressive unification and homogenization in the object of each consciousness. The object of the consciousness of the sphere of sense desire is the most proliferated and differentiated, those of the form and formless types of consciousness are increasingly less proliferated. The fourth type of consciousness is directed toward a transcendental type of object.

Let us now look at the subjective classification of consciousness. This consciousness has to do with the nature of the subjective consciousness itself and is also divided into four classes: the wholesome consciousness (*kusala*), the unwholesome consciousness (*akusala*), the resultant consciousness (*vipaka*), and the ineffective or functional consciousness (*kiriya*).

The wholesome and unwholesome classes are karmically active classes of consciousness; in other words, they have karmic potential. The resultant and functional types of consciousness are not karmically active and do not have karmic potential. The resultant class cannot bring about results because it is itself the result, while the functional class cannot do so because its potentiality is exhausted in the action itself.

We can thus place the wholesome and unwholesome categories in the more general category of karmically active consciousnesses, and the resultant and functional types into the category of passive consciousnesses that do not have karmic

potential.

It might be useful to look for a moment at the meaning of the terms "wholesome" (*kusala*) and "unwholesome" (*akusala*), and then at the definition of the wholesome and unwholesome categories of subjective consciousness. Wholesome means "what tends toward cure" or "what tends toward desirable results." Here we are again reminded of the therapeutic concern of Buddhist philosophy. Unwholesome means "what tends toward undesirable results" or "what tends toward perpetuation of suffering." The terms "wholesome" and "unwholesome" are also related to skillful and unskillful, or intelligent and unintelligent, moments of consciousness.

However, for convenience, people still sometimes refer to wholesome and unwholesome consciousness as good and bad, moral and immoral. "Wholesome" and "unwholesome" can also be defined with reference to the three wholesome and unwholesome root causes (non-greed, non ill-will, and non-delusion, and greed, ill-will, and delusion, respectively). Greed, ill-will, and delusion are the derivative forms of fundamental ignorance, which is the mistaken notion of a self as opposed to what is other-than-self. Ignorance in its fundamental sense might be likened to the root of a tree, and greed, ill-will, and delusion to its branches.

The karmic potential of a moment of consciousness conditioned by any of the three unwholesome causes is unwholesome, while the potential of a moment conditioned by any of the three wholesome causes is wholesome. These wholesome and unwholesome classes of consciousness are karmically active, and they are followed by a resultant class—in other words, by the ripened results of those wholesome and unwholesome actions. The inactive or functional class refers to actions that are not productive of further karma, and that also do not result from wholesome and unwholesome karma, such as the actions of enlightened ones—the

Buddhas and Arhats—and deeds of indifferent or neutral karmic content.

In addition to these two general systems for classifying consciousness—the objective, which classifies consciousness according to its object and direction, and the subjective, which classifies consciousness according to its nature—we have a third system in which consciousness is distinguished according to feeling, knowledge, and volition.

In the classification according to feeling, every conscious factor partakes of an emotional quality: agreeable, disagreeable, or indifferent. These three can be expanded into five by dividing the agreeable category into mentally agreeable and physically agreeable, and the disagreeable category into mentally disagreeable and physically disagreeable. There is no category of physically indifferent consciousness because indifference is primarily a mental quality.

In the classification in terms of knowledge, again we have a threefold division: conscious factors accompanied by knowledge of the nature of the object, conscious factors unaccompanied by knowledge of the nature of the object, and conscious factors accompanied by definite wrong views about the nature of the object. These can also be called the presence of correct knowledge, the absence of correct knowledge, and the presence of erroneous knowledge.

Finally, in the classification according to volition, there is a twofold division into automatic and volitional consciousness—in other words, moments of consciousness that are automatic in nature, and moments that have an intentional element.

Let us now look at the sense-sphere consciousness (*kamavachara*). There are fifty-four types of consciousness in this category, which divide into three groups:

The first group consists of twelve factors that are karmically active and that have unwholesome karmic potential. The twelve can be subdivided into factors conditioned by one of the three unwholesome conditions of greed, ill-will, and

delusion.

The second group consists of eighteen reactive or passive factors of consciousness, which can be further broken down into those that are resultant and those that are functional. Fifteen of the eighteen are resultant, and refer in general terms to experiences that are agreeable or disagreeable, the result of wholesome or unwholesome factors experienced through the five physical senses and the sixth mental sense. The remaining three are functional, having no karmic potential and not being the consequence of karmically active wholesome or unwholesome factors.

The third category consists of twenty-four wholesome factors of consciousness that are karmically active and thus have karmic potential conditioned by non-greed, non-ill-will, and non-delusion.

Within the class of sense-sphere consciousness, therefore, we have fifty-four types of consciousness that can be analyzed in terms of active and passive, wholesome and unwholesome, resultant and functional, and even in terms of feeling, knowledge, and volition.

I want to conclude by spending a few moments on the multivalent nature of terms in the Abhidharma in particular and in Buddhism in general. The factors of consciousness listed in the Abhidharma, and the terms used to describe them, have different values and meanings according to the functions they perform. Failure to understand this leads to confusion about Abhidharmic classifications.

Even in the early years of the Abhidharma, there were critics who failed to understand that the factors in it are classified functionally, not ontologically. What this means is that if you survey the factors of consciousness listed in the Abhidharma literature, you find the same factor occurring in different categories. Your initial conclusion may be that there is a great deal of repetition in Abhidharmic material, but this is not the point. The presence of the same factor in different categories is due

to its functioning differently in each one.

The commentary to the *Dhammasangani (Classification of Factors)* records the objection of repetition raised by an opponent. It replies with the analogy that when a king collects taxes from people, he does so not on the basis of their existence as identifiable individuals, but of their functions as earning entities. (This is also the case today, when one pays taxes on the basis of being a property owner, a salaried worker, on the earnings of one's stocks and bonds, and so forth.) In the same way, the factors enumerated in the Abhidharma occur in different categories because in each case it is the factor's function that counts, not its essence.

This is also the case with terms. We need to understand terms in context—by the way they are used—rather than imposing rigid, essentialistic, and naturalistic definitions. Take, for instance, "suffering" (*dukkha*) and "happiness" (*sukha*). In the analysis of the factors of consciousness, these terms mean physical suffering and physical happiness. Yet when we talk about *dukkha* in the context of the first noble truth, it includes not only four physical sufferings but also four mental sufferings. Similarly, *sankhara* means simply "volition" in one context but "all compounded things" in another.

Thus when we study the Abhidharma, we need to understand the words in context. If we keep this in mind, we will be adopting the phenomenological spirit of Buddhist philosophy and will find it easier to approach the significance of what is being said. Otherwise, we will find ourselves trapped into rigid, unworkable definitions of terms and rigid, unhelpful ideas about factors of experience.

Chapter Thirty-Four
The Form and Formless Spheres

In Chapter 33 I introduced several schemes for classifying consciousness that may be difficult to grasp, particularly for newcomers to Abhidharmic studies. Hence there are two additional points I would like to make as we proceed with our discussion.

First, to acquire understanding, one needs to cultivate (1) study, (2) consideration, and (3) meditation. It is not enough just to hear or read about the classifications of consciousness: one needs to consider exactly how they function, exactly what their meaning is. From my own experience, these schemes of classification will not begin to make sense until one spends some time running them back and forth in one's mind. Finally, after study and consideration, one can use them in one's meditation.

Second, to understand these classifications, it helps to consider a more concrete and accessible model. Suppose you want to know how many people are likely to watch daytime television in Singapore. You might classify the population into employed and unemployed; again, you might divide the unemployed group into English-speaking and Chinese-speaking, so you know how many are likely to watch English programs compared to Chinese ones. You might divide the population into male and female, or into school-going and non-school-going, and the school-going group into those who attend English schools and those who attend Chinese schools. Given a certain group of factors—in this case, the individual people who make up a population—there are many ways to classify them depending on what you want to

find out.

It is the same way with the Abhidharmic classification of consciousness: we have a set of types of consciousness, and we classify them in different ways according to what we want to find out. If we remember this general rule about why and how we classify factors of consciousness, and then run the schemes back and forth in our minds, they will begin to make more sense.

In this chapter we will look at the form-sphere consciousness (*rupavachara*) and the formless-sphere consciousness (*arupavachara*; see Chapter 33). Here we are primarily concerned with the analysis of types of consciousness that arise from meditation, concentration, or absorption (*jhana*). As in the genesis of the Abhidharma itself, Sariputta played a vital role in the beginnings of Abhidharmic analysis of consciousness. In the *Anupada Sutta* it is mentioned that, after achieving the various states of meditation, Sariputta applied an Abhidharmic type of analysis by enumerating, classifying, and identifying the types of consciousness he had experienced.

Much emphasis was placed on analysis even in the early period of Buddhist history, because the experience of extraordinary states of meditation can be easily misinterpreted. In non-Buddhist traditions, such states are consistently misinterpreted as evidence of a transcendental, supranatural being or of an eternal soul.

By pointing out that states of meditation, like experience in general, are characterized by impermanence, transience, and insubstantiality, analysis wards off the three defilements of: (a) craving or attachment to the supernatural and extraordinary states of consciousness achieved through meditation; (b) false views, that is, the misinterpretation of these states of meditation as evidence of the existence of a transcendental being or eternal soul; and (c) conceit, which arises from the notion

that one has achieved extraordinary states of meditation.

The cultivation of states of meditation and the attainment of the absorptions is a very important part of Buddhist practice because it is the aim of mental development, which is one of the three major divisions of the Buddhist path (i.e., morality, mental development, and wisdom). To achieve these states of meditation, one needs to create the foundation of morality and withdraw to some extent from involvement in worldly activities. Having achieved these preliminary conditions, one then proceeds to cultivate the states of meditation through various methods.

Briefly, one proceeds by means of some forty traditional objects of meditation, which include ten supports (*kasina*). These objects are coordinated to the temperament of the meditator. In other words, particular objects of meditation are prescribed for certain kinds of temperament. In general, one begins with an external support, gradually that external support is internalized and conceptualized, and finally that support is discarded and one enters the state of meditation proper.

Five factors of absorption (*jhananga*) are crucial to developing the states of meditation that result in the type of consciousness belonging to the form and formless spheres: (i) initial application (*vitakka*), (ii) sustained application (*vichara*), (iii) interest, enthusiasm, or rapture (*piti*), (iv) happiness or bliss (*sukha*), and (v) one-pointedness (*ekaggata*). These five factors are also evident in most types of consciousness, including the sense-sphere consciousness and even the consciousness of some of the more developed animals.

Take, for instance, one-pointedness. Every conscious moment participates in one-pointedness to some degree. This one-pointedness enables us to focus on a particular object in our conscious experience. If it were not for one-pointedness, we would not be able to pick out an object of consciousness from the stream of objects of consciousness. The five factors of absorption play a particular role in the

development of meditative consciousness in that they raise our consciousness from the sense sphere to the form sphere, and thence to the formless sphere, through intensification. Intensification implies the enhancement and development of the power of particular functions of consciousness.

Intensification of the first two factors, initial application and sustained application, leads to the development of the intellect, which can then serve to develop insight. Similarly, intensification of the fifth factor, one-pointedness, leads to the development of fully concentrated or absorbed consciousness. Intensification of all five factors leads progressively to the attainment of supernormal powers.

The five factors also help elevate one's consciousness from the sense sphere to the form and formless spheres by removing the five hindrances (*nivarana*): initial application corrects sloth and torpor; sustained application corrects doubt; enthusiasm corrects ill-will; happiness corrects restlessness and worry; and one-pointedness corrects sensual desire.

Let us look more closely at the five factors of absorption to see how they produce concentrated consciousness. To do this, we need to look in greater detail at their meaning. In the context of developing meditative consciousness, initial application (*vitakka*) is better termed "applied thought," since it means "hitting upon," "striking," or "mounting." *Vitakka* mounts the mind, placing it on the object of meditation; *vichara* (sustained application) then keeps the mind firmly on that object, maintaining the placement of the mind. The third factor of absorption—enthusiasm, interest, or rapture (*piti*)—motivates one to pursue the activity of meditation diligently.

It may be helpful to contrast interest (*piti*) and happiness (*sukha*) to understand the relationship between the two. Interest and happiness belong to two different classes of experience: interest to the volitional class (*sankhara*), and happiness to the

feeling class (*vedana*). On the one hand, interest is active anticipation and enthusiasm; on the other hand, happiness is a feeling of contentment or bliss. The commentaries have given the following example to illustrate the relation between the terms. Suppose a man in a desert is told that there is a pond of fresh water at the edge of a village nearby. Upon hearing the news, he experiences a keen sense of interest (*piti*) and is motivated and encouraged by the information. But when he actually reaches the pond and quenches his thirst, he experiences happiness (*sukha*). Thus it is interest or enthusiasm that encourages us to proceed toward concentrated consciousness, whereas happiness or bliss is the actual experience of mental happiness that results from concentrated consciousness.

One-pointedness (*ekaggata*) is collection, non-distraction of the mind, focusing the mind without wavering on the object of meditation. It is like the flame of a lamp which remains steadfast in a room free of drafts.

When all five factors of absorption are present, we have the first form-sphere consciousness, or absorption. As factors of absorption are eliminated one by one, we progress step by step to the fifth form-sphere consciousness. In other words, when we eliminate initial application, we have the second form-sphere absorption; when sustained application is removed, we have the third form-sphere absorption; when interest is removed, we have the fourth form-sphere absorption; and when happiness is removed, we have the fifth form-sphere absorption.

These five types of consciousness are karmically active, wholesome types of consciousness. In addition, there are five reactive, resultant and five inactive or functional types of consciousness. The first five are karmically active and are present in this life. The second five are the result of the first five; in other words, cultivation of form-sphere absorption results in rebirth in the form sphere. The third five are the five form-sphere absorptions as practiced by the liberated ones (Arhats), who have

broken the bonds of action and reaction; hence the five form-sphere absorptions are regarded as inactive when practiced by them. Thus there are fifteen types of form-sphere consciousness: five wholesome-active, five resultant, and five inactive.

When one has attained the fifth form-sphere consciousness, one experiences dissatisfaction with the limited nature of the form-sphere absorptions. One then progresses to formless-sphere meditation, again by means of an object of meditation, commonly one of the ten supports (*kasina*). One achieves this transition by extending the support until it covers the infinity of space, then discarding the support and meditating on the infinity of space, thereby achieving the first of the formless-sphere absorptions.

When this is achieved, one progresses to the second formless-sphere absorption, which dwells on the infinity of consciousness. At this stage, rather than focusing on the object of the meditating consciousness (i.e., the infinity of space), one focuses on the subject of the meditative consciousness (i.e., the consciousness that pervades infinite space, or infinite consciousness).

The third formless-sphere absorption dwells on the present nonexistence of the preceding infinite consciousness that pervaded infinity. In other words, the third formless-sphere absorption dwells on nothing at all, nothingness, or voidness.

Finally, the fourth formless-sphere absorption dwells on the realm of neither perception nor non-perception, a condition where consciousness is so subtle that it cannot be described as existent or nonexistent.

As with the form-sphere absorptions, there are three sets of formless-sphere consciousness (but with four instead of five types each). Four formless-sphere types of consciousness belong to the wholesome-active category; four belong to the resultant-reactive category, that is, rebirth in the formless sphere; and four belong to the inactive or functional category, the formless-sphere absorptions as practiced by

the Arhats. In sum, there twelve types of formless-sphere consciousness: four wholesome-active, four resultant, and four inactive.

If we look at the progression in the formless-sphere absorptions, we see a gradual unification and rarefaction of consciousness—an absorption in the infinity of the object (space), then an absorption in the infinity of the subject (consciousness), followed by an absorption in nothingness, and, finally, an absorption in neither perception nor non-perception. You will remember that, when we talked about consciousness and its object as the fundamental, germinal structure of experience, we had in the sense-sphere consciousness the most fragmented type of experience, where consciousness and its object are broken down into many factors. As we progress through the form and formless spheres, gradually we have a unification of the subject and a unification of the object, so that when we arrive at the fourth formless-sphere absorption, we have reached the summit of mundane experience.

It is interesting that the form-sphere and formless-sphere absorptions were known to yogis before the time of the Buddha and were practiced by the Buddha's contemporaries. We have reason to believe that the two teachers with whom Gotama studied before his enlightenment were practitioners of these meditations. The formless-sphere absorptions were the highest level of spiritual development to which man could aspire before the Buddha, on the night of his enlightenment, demonstrated that absorption has to be combined with wisdom to become truly supramundane.

This is why it is said that, although one can achieve the highest development possible in meditation and be reborn at the pinnacle of the formless sphere, when the power of that meditative absorption—which is, after all, impermanent—wanes, one will be reborn in a lower sphere. For this reason, one must go beyond even these very rarefied and highly developed levels of meditative consciousness. One has to couple

the concentrated and unified consciousness of the absorptions with wisdom; only then can one progress beyond the mundane to the supramundane types of consciousness.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE
Supramundane Consciousness

In this chapter we conclude our review of the analysis of consciousness, which brings us to the end of the first book of the *Abhidharma Pitaka*, the *Dhammasangani (Classification of Factors)*. Here I will talk about the last of the four objective classifications of consciousness outlined in Chapter 32, namely, the supramundane consciousness (*alokiya chitta*).

There are two ways of distinguishing the supramundane types of consciousness from the mundane types (the consciousness of the sense sphere, form sphere, and formless sphere). The first distinction is in terms of determination and direction. The mundane consciousness is determined, undirected, and subject to karma and conditions, whereas the supramundane consciousness is determining, directed toward a goal, and no longer subject to forces beyond its control. Supramundane consciousness is determining because of the predominance not of karma but of wisdom.

The second distinction is that the mundane types of consciousness have as their object conditioned phenomena, whereas the supramundane types have as their object the unconditioned—namely, nirvana. The Buddha spoke of nirvanà as an unborn and uncreated state. Such a state is necessary in order that there be a way out of the conditioned world of suffering. In this sense the object of the supramundane type of consciousness is uncreated and unconditioned.

We can generally divide the supramundane types of consciousness into four

active and four passive types of consciousness. Normally, types of consciousness can be active or passive, and the passive types can be reactive (resultant) or inactive (functional). However, there are no functional or inactive types of consciousness in this category because here the types of consciousness are determining, not determined.

These eight basic types of supramundane consciousness, four active and four passive, each correspond to the path and the fruit of the four types of noble ones—the stream-winner (*sotapanna*), the once-returner (*sakadagami*), the non-returner (*anagami*), and the Arhat. Here I ought to point out another distinction between supramundane and mundane consciousness. In the mundane types of consciousness, active and resultant types of consciousness can be separated by relatively long periods of time: in other words, an active, conscious factor may not produce its resultant factor until much later in the present life or even until a future life. For example, in the case of the consciousness of the form and formless spheres, the resultant consciousness does not occur until a subsequent life. In the supramundane types of consciousness, however, the resultant (or fruit) consciousness follows the active (or path) consciousness immediately.

The eight types of supramundane consciousness can be expanded to forty by combining each of the eight with each of the five form-sphere absorptions. The four types of active supramundane consciousness (the path consciousness of the stream-winner and so forth) combine with the consciousness belonging to the first absorption and so forth, so that there are twenty types of active supramundane consciousness associated with the four types of noble persons and five form-sphere absorptions. Similarly, the four types of resultant supramundane consciousness (the fruit consciousness of the stream-winner and so forth) combine with the consciousness belonging to the first absorption and so forth, so that there are twenty

types of resultant supramundane consciousness, and forty in all.

This occurs in the following way. Based on the first form-sphere absorption, the path and fruit consciousness of the stream-winner arise. Similarly, based on the second third, fourth, and fifth form-sphere absorptions, the path and the fruit consciousness of the once-returner, the non-returner, and the Arhat arise. The consciousness belonging to the supramundane consciousness is therefore developed based on the various absorptions.

Let us go on to define the four stages of enlightenment: stream-winner (*sotapanna*), once-returner (*sakadagami*), non-returner (*anagami*), and Arhat. The progress of a noble one through the four stages of enlightenment is marked by his or her ability to overcome certain fetters at each stage. There is a progressive elimination of the ten fetters (*samyojana*) that bind us to the conditioned universe until such time as we are able to achieve liberation.

Entry into the stream is marked by the elimination of three fetters. The first is the belief in the independent and permanent existence of an individual person (*sakkaya ditthi*)—namely, taking the mental and physical factors of the personality (form, feeling, volition, perception, and consciousness) to be the self. It is therefore not coincidental that we say that the mundane types of consciousness are conditioned by the aggregates, whereas the supramundane types of consciousness are undetermined by the aggregates. Overcoming the first fetter marks one's passage from the status of an ordinary worldling to the status of a noble person.

The second fetter overcome by the stream-winner is doubt (*vichikichchha*). This is primarily doubt about the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, but also about the rules of discipline and interdependent origination.

The third fetter is belief in rules and rituals (*silabbataparamasa*). This fetter has often been misunderstood, but refers to the practices of non-Buddhists who believe

that adhering to codes of moral discipline and ascetic rituals alone can lead them to liberation.

When these three fetters are overcome, one enters the stream and will achieve liberation within no more than seven lifetimes. One will not be reborn in states of woe (the realms of the hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals), and one is guaranteed implicit faith in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

Having achieved this first stage of enlightenment, the noble person goes on to weaken two additional fetters, sensual desire and ill-will, thus attaining the status of a once-returner. These fetters are particularly strong, which is why, even on this stage, they are only weakened, not removed. Sensual desire and ill-will may still occasionally arise, although not arise in the gross form familiar to worldly persons.

When these two fetters are finally eliminated, one attains the stage of the non-returner. At this third stage one is no longer reborn in the cycle of birth and death but only in the pure abodes reserved for non-returners and Arhats.

When the five remaining fetters are eliminated—attachment to the sphere of form (*rupa raga*), attachment to the formless sphere (*arupa raga*), conceit (*mana*), agitation (*uddhachcha*), and ignorance (*avijja*)—one achieves the pinnacle of the supramundane types of consciousness, the fruit consciousness of the Arhat.

These four stages may be divided into two groups: the first three, which are called stages of one in training, and the fourth, the stage of one who is no longer in training. For this reason, it may be useful to think of progress to Arhatship as a process of graduation, as in a program of academic studies. On each stage one overcomes certain barriers of ignorance and thereby graduates to a higher stage of training.

At this point, a qualitative change occurs, from an undirected and determined condition to a directed and determining one. How does one make nirvana the object

of one's consciousness, thereby transforming a mundane consciousness whose object is conditioned into a supramundane consciousness whose object is unconditioned? How does one realize nirvana? This is done through developing insight, or wisdom (*panna*).

To develop insight, we apply the two Abhidharmic methods of analysis and synthesis (see Chapter 32). We apply the analytical method in our examination of consciousness and its object—in other words, mind and matter. Through this analysis we arrive at the realization that what we previously took to be a homogeneous, unitary, and substantial phenomenon is in fact composed of individual elements, all of which are impermanent and in a constant state of flux. This is true of both mind and matter.

Similarly, we apply the synthetic method by considering the causes and the conditions of our personal existence. In relation to what factors do we exist as a psycho-physical entity? This examination reveals that the personality exists dependent on five factors—ignorance, craving, clinging, karma, and the material sustenance of life (namely, nourishment).

Insight in general is developed through applying the two Abhidharmic methods by dissecting internal and external, mental and physical phenomena and examining them in relation to their causes and conditions. These analytical and relational investigations reveal three interrelated, universal characteristics of existence: (1) impermanence, (2) suffering, and (3) not-self. Whatever is impermanence is suffering, because when we see the factors of experience disintegrate, their disintegration and their impermanence are an occasion for suffering. Moreover, whatever is impermanent and suffering cannot be the self, because self can neither be transient nor can it be painful.

Penetrating these three characteristics leads to renunciation, to freedom from the

conditioned universe. Through understanding these three, one realizes that the three mundane spheres are like a banana tree—without essence. This realization leads to renunciation, to a disengagement from the conditioned sphere, and enables the consciousness to direct itself toward an unconditioned object, nirvana.

Any one of the three characteristics can serve as a key to this new orientation. Any one of the three can be taken as an object of contemplation to develop one's insight. We can see this in the biographical accounts of the foremost disciples of the Buddha. Khema, for instance, achieved liberation through the contemplation of impermanence (see Chapter 22).

Once one has developed insight into one of the three universal characteristics, one can experience briefly a vision of nirvana. One's first acquaintance with nirvana may be likened to a flash of lightning that illuminates one's way in the darkness of night. The clarity of that flash remains for a long time impressed upon one's mind, and enables one to continue on one's way knowing that one is proceeding in the right direction.

The first glimpse of nirvana achieved by the stream-winner serves as the orientation by which he directs his progress toward nirvana. One might almost liken this gradual development of insight to the acquisition of a skill. After first managing to bicycle a few yards without falling, it may be some time before one becomes an expert cyclist. But having successfully ridden those first few yards, one never forgets that experience and can confidently progress toward one's goal.

It is in this sense that contemplation of the three characteristics leads to the three doors of liberation: the door of signlessness, the door of wishlessness, and the door of emptiness. Contemplating the characteristic of impermanence leads to the door of signlessness; contemplating suffering leads to the door of wishlessness, or freedom from desire; and contemplating not-self leads to the door of emptiness. These three

doors of liberation are the culmination of meditation on the three universal characteristics.

Thus one gradually progresses through the four stages of enlightenment and eventually achieves Arhatship, that stage of victory over the afflictions in which the unwholesome roots of greed, ill-will, and delusion are totally removed. Having uprooted the afflictions, the Arhat is free from the cycle of birth and death and is no longer reborn.

Despite some attempts to tarnish it with the charge of selfishness, the goal of Arhatship is a beneficial and compassionate mode of being. One need only look at the Buddha's instructions to his eminent Arhat disciples, and also at the careers of these disciples, to see that in the time of the Buddha Arhatship was not a passive or selfish state of being. Sariputta, Moggallana, and others were actively engaged in teaching both the laity and other members of the Buddhist Order. The Buddha himself exhorted his Arhat disciples to go forth for the benefit of the many. The goal of Arhatship is a glorious and worthy one that ought not be depreciated in any way by the fact that the Buddhist tradition also acknowledges the goal of the private or individual Buddha (*Pachcheka Buddha*) and the goal of Buddhahood.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX
Analysis of Mental States

In the Abhidharma, mental states are defined as "those factors which are associated with consciousness, which arise and perish with consciousness, and which have the same object and bases as consciousness." This immediately indicates the very close relationship between consciousness (*chitta*) and mental states (*chetasika*). One of the best analogies to describe their relationship is that of the framework of a building and the building materials, or a skeleton and the flesh that covers it. Here the types of consciousness are the skeleton, while the mental states are the flesh that goes to build up a body of conscious experience.

With this in mind, it is helpful to consider the types of consciousness enumerated in the Abhidharmic analysis of consciousness in terms of the mental states with which they are likely to be associated. One's own analysis will not necessarily correspond exactly to the analysis in the texts. But insofar as certain mental states naturally appear to follow from particular types of consciousness, we will arrive at an understanding of how certain mental states and types of consciousness go together. This is far more important than memorizing the list of mental states.

There are three general categories of mental states: wholesome, unwholesome, and unspecified. Unspecified mental states are neither wholesome nor unwholesome, but take on the nature of the other mental states with which they are associated. These unspecified mental states play a central role in the construction of conscious

experience, much like the cement without which the building of experience cannot hold together.

There are two groups of unspecified mental states: universal (or primary), and particular (or secondary). The universal mental states are present in all types of consciousness without exception, whereas the particular mental states only occur in certain types of consciousness.

There are seven universal unspecified mental states: (1) contact, (2) feeling, (3) perception, (4) volition, (5) one-pointedness, (6) attention, and (7) vitality.

Contact is the conjunction of consciousness with an object. It is the coexistence of subject and object which is the foundation of all conscious experience.

Feeling is the emotional quality of an experience—pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent.

Perception implies recognition of the sense-sphere of the faculty to which a given sense impression pertains, that is, to the sphere of eye consciousness, ear consciousness, and so on.

Volition, in this context, does not mean free will but an instinctive volitional response.

One-pointedness occurs not in the sense of a factor of absorption but in the sense of the limitation of consciousness to a particular object. As mentioned in Chapter 34, one-pointedness occurs even in ordinary, non-meditative types of consciousness. One-pointedness is a necessary mental state in all types of consciousness because it is one-pointedness that isolates a given object from the undifferentiated stream of objects.

Attention can be seen in relation to one-pointedness. One-pointedness and attention are the negative and positive aspects of the same function. One-pointedness limits one's experience to a particular object whereas attention directs one's

awareness to a particular object. One-pointedness and attention function together to isolate and make one conscious of a particular object.

Vitality refers to the force which binds together the other six states of consciousness.

There are six particular unspecified mental states: (1) initial application, (2) sustained application, (3) decision, (4) envy, (5) interest, and (6) desire. We have already encountered some of these in the context of the factors of absorption. The third particular mental state, usually translated as "decision" (*adhimokkha*), is a very important one that indicates a particular decisive function of consciousness. The literal meaning of the original term is "liberation," in the sense here of "liberation from doubt." The sixth particular mental state, "desire" (*Chhanda*), may be so translated as long as we remember that desire for sensual pleasure (*kamachhanda*) is negative and destructive, whereas desire for liberation (*dhammachhanda*) is positive and constructive. Desire, therefore, has both a wholesome and an unwholesome function, depending both on the object of desire and on the other mental states with which desire is associated.

Let us go on to look at the unwholesome mental states. There are fourteen of them, and they are associated with the twelve unwholesome types of consciousness (see Chapter 33) in five ways, which differentiates them into five groups. The first three groups take their character from the three unwholesome roots: delusion (*moha*), greed (*lobha*), and ill-will (*dosa*). The fourth group consists of sloth and torpor (*thina* and *middha*); the fifth consists of doubt (*vichikichchha*).

Let us look at the group headed by delusion. This group is universally present in all types of unwholesome consciousness and it includes four factors: delusion, shamelessness, unscrupulousness, or fearlessness, and restlessness. Both shamelessness and fearlessness have moral and ethical connotations, which function

internally and externally.

When we speak here of shamelessness, what we mean is an internal inability to restrain oneself from unwholesome actions due to the inability to apply one's personal standards to one's actions. And when we speak of fearlessness, or lack of dread, what we mean is the inability to recognize the application of social standards of morality to one's actions. With these two terms, we have an indication that standards of morality are arrived at both inwardly, in relation to oneself, and outwardly, in relation to others.

Particularly in cases of deluded consciousness, we find a peculiar pattern of behavior. When a person's consciousness is dominated by delusion and he is unable to apply internal standards of morality, he acts in an unwholesome way. Similarly, when he is unable to apply social standards of morality, he is careless about his actions. This inability to apply internal and external standards of morality to one's actions creates restlessness, the fourth factor in this delusion-dominated group.

The second of the five groups of unwholesome mental states is the greed-dominated group: here greed is accompanied by mistaken belief and conceit. The personal and practical extension of a greed-dominated consciousness is a tendency toward self-aggrandizement, the accumulation and exhibition of knowledge, and the occurrence of pride, egoism, and conceit.

The third group of unwholesome mental states is that dominated by ill-will. This ill-will is accompanied by envy, avarice, and worry.

The fourth group includes sloth and torpor, which are particularly relevant in the context of volitionally induced categories of consciousness.

The fifth group consists of doubt, which applies in all cases where decision is not present—namely, the decision (or "liberation from doubt") that is one of the six particular unspecified mental states.

There are nineteen mental states common to all wholesome types of consciousness. A number of these are factors conducive to enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiya dhamma*), and thus play an important role in the cultivation and development of one's spiritual potential. The list begins with faith and includes mindfulness, shame, dread, non-greed, non-hatred, balance of mind, tranquillity, lightness, elasticity, adaptability, and proficiency and rectitude of psychic elements and of mind. Notice the presence of shame and dread, the direct opposites of the unwholesome mental states of shamelessness and fearlessness.

The nineteen wholesome mental states are occasionally accompanied by six additional ones: the three abstinences (right speech, right action, and right livelihood); the two illimitables or immeasurables (compassion and appreciative joy); and reason or wisdom. When these six are included, there are twenty-five wholesome mental states in all.

Wisdom occupies a position within the wholesome mental states similar to the position of desire within the unspecified ones. Just as desire can be unwholesome or wholesome depending on its object, so wisdom can be mundane or supramundane depending on whether its object is ordinary knowledge or ultimate reality.

To reinforce what I have said about the close relationship between the types of consciousness and the mental states, I would like briefly to refer to the subjective classification of consciousness touched on in Chapter 33. There we spoke of the types of consciousness according to their karmic value—wholesome, unwholesome, resultant, and functional. Particularly within the sphere of sense desire, we spoke of a further classification of consciousness in terms of feeling, knowledge, and volition.

Combining these, we have within the sphere of sense desire a fourfold subjective classification of consciousness according to its karmic, emotional, intellectual, and

volitional value—in other words, (1) in terms of wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral; (2) in terms of pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent; (3) in terms of being associated with knowledge, disassociated with knowledge, or associated with wrong beliefs; and (4) in terms of being prompted or unprompted.

With this fourfold scheme, we can see how the types of consciousness are determined by the presence of mental states. For example, within the karmic value category, wholesome types of consciousness are determined by wholesome mental states. Within the emotional value category, the types of consciousness are determined by the presence of states that belong to the feeling group (mental pleasure, mental pain, physical pleasure, physical pain, and indifference). Within the intellectual value category, the presence or absence of delusion determines whether a particular type of consciousness is associated with knowledge, disassociated with knowledge, or associated with wrong belief. And within the volitional value category, the presence or absence of doubt and decision determines whether a particular type of consciousness is prompted or unprompted, non-spontaneous or spontaneous.

Thus the four subjective classifications of consciousness clarify just how the various types of consciousness are determined by the presence of appropriate mental states—wholesome, unwholesome, associated with knowledge, and so forth.

Finally, I would like to examine how the mental states operate in counteracting each type of consciousness. This is interesting because the Abhidharmic analysis of consciousness has sometimes been likened to the Periodic Table's analysis of elements by their respective atomic values. One cannot help but be struck by the almost chemical properties of the mental states: just as, in chemistry, a base neutralizes an acid, and vice versa, so in the analysis of consciousness, one mental state counteracts certain other mental states, and vice versa.

For example, within the factors of absorption (see Chapter 34), the five mental states counteract the five hindrances (initial application counteracts sloth and torpor; sustained application counteracts doubt; interest counteracts ill-will; happiness counteracts restlessness and worry; and one-pointedness counteracts sensual desire). Where there isn't a one-to-one relationship, groups of wholesome factors counteract a single unwholesome factor or group of unwholesome factors (faith counteracts doubt and delusion; mental balance and tranquillity counteract doubt and worry; lightness, elasticity, adaptability, and proficiency of the mind and the psychic elements counteract sloth and torpor; and so forth). Again, when decision is present, doubt is not.

In this way, the various wholesome mental states counter and oppose various unwholesome ones. The presence of certain mental states eliminates states opposed to them and thus makes room for states in accord with them. Through understanding the relationship between consciousness and mental states, and through cultivating the wholesome mental states, we can gradually change and improve the character of our conscious experience.

Chapter Thirty-Seven
Analysis of Thought-Processes

In this chapter we will begin to see, in a more specific and direct way, how the analysis of consciousness and the analysis of mental states can really contribute to the awakening of insight, and how such analysis can also be interpreted in our daily life to change our understanding of our situation.

Why analyze the processes of thought or the processes of perception? To answer this, we need to remind ourselves of the general purpose of the Abhidharma—namely, to facilitate our understanding of the ultimate nature of things, which share the three universal characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and not-self. In the analysis of thought-processes, we can see impermanence and not-self clearly revealed, as two analogies from the discourses of the Buddha show.

The Buddha likened the life span of a living being to a single point on the wheel of a chariot. He said that, strictly speaking, a living being only endures for the time it takes one thought to arise and perish, just as the chariot wheel, whether rolling or at rest, makes contact with the ground at only a single point. In this context, the past moment existed but it does not exist now, nor will it exist in the future; the present moment exists now but did not exist in the past, nor will it exist in the future; and the future moment, although it will exist in the future, does not exist now, nor did it exist in the past.

The Buddha also referred to the case of a king who had never heard the sound of a lute. When he did hear one, the king asked his ministers what it was that was so

enchanting and enthralling. His ministers replied that it was the sound of a lute. The king asked for the lute; when his ministers brought one, he asked them where the sound was. When the ministers explained that the sound was produced by a combination of diverse factors, the king said that the lute was a poor thing indeed, broke it up with his own hands, and had the pieces burned and their ashes scattered. What the ministers called the sound of a lute, the king said, was nowhere to be found. Similarly, nowhere among the physical and mental factors of experience—among factors of form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness—is there a self to be found. Thought-processes are, like the sound of a lute, also devoid of self.

The analysis of thought-processes also has a very specific application in the area of mental development, in the mastery and control of objects of the senses. You may recall that we spoke earlier about the sensitivity of the mind to the objects of the senses, and said that the mind is constantly subject to distractions that arise because of contact with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations. The Buddha himself declared that one is either conquered by sense objects or conquers them: in other words, one is either controlled by and subject to sense stimuli or manages and dominates sense stimuli. This is why Nagarjuna once said that even an animal can be victorious in battle, whereas he who is able to conquer the momentary, ever-changing objects of the senses is the true hero.

When someone subdues, masters, and controls the objects of the senses, we call him heedful. Heedfulness is akin to mindfulness, which the Buddha said is the one way to freedom. Heedlessness is the source of death and of bondage in samsara, while heedfulness is the source of the deathless, or nirvana. Those who were formerly heedless and later become heedful, like Nanda and Angulimala, are able to achieve the goal of freedom.

By analyzing and understanding how the objects of the senses are perceived and

assimilated by consciousness, we can pave the way toward right understanding in terms of impermanence and not-self, and toward control over the momentary objects of the senses. Finally, we can achieve heedfulness, which is the key to changing our existence from one dominated by the afflictions to one that is purified and noble.

We can begin our analysis of thought-processes by examining their place in our experience. Take the comparison of life to a river, with a source and an outlet. Between birth and death, between the source of the river and its mouth, there is a continuum but not an identity. In Abhidharmic terms, birth or rebirth is the "uniting" or "connecting" factor (*patisandhi*), the life continuum is the "subconscious" factor (*bhavanga*), and death is the "falling away" factor (*chuti*). These three factors have one thing in common: their object is the last conscious factor of the preceding life. This object determines them as wholesome or unwholesome resultant factors of consciousness.

In this context, it is important to remember that *bhavanga* runs concurrent with the reproductive karma that gives a particular life its general characteristics and sustains it until it is either interrupted or exhausted. Thus the past, present, and future of an individual life are united not only consciously, by the continuum of *patisandhi, bhavanga,* and *chuti,* but also subconsciously, by *bhavanga* alone. This subconscious factor of life continuum preserves continuity and sustains life even in the absence of conscious thought-processes, as in dreamless sleep and moments of unconsciousness like coma. In between the various conscious thought-processes, *bhavanga* reasserts itself and preserves the continuity of life.

To summarize, our life begins with the uniting or connecting conscious factor (*patisandhi*) that joins the previous life to this life. It is sustained throughout the course of this life by the subconscious factor of life continuum (*bhavanga*), and it ends with the falling away (*chuti*) that again precedes union (in the form of

patisandhi) with the subsequent life.

Consciousness, as opposed to subconsciousness (*bhavanga*), arises as a phenomenon of resistance and vibration. In other words, *bhavanga* remains subconscious until it is interrupted or obstructed by an object, as when we place a dam across a river and find that the course of the river is interrupted, or subject an electrical current to resistance and find that the phenomenon of light arises. This contact between *bhavanga* and an object results in resistance, and this resistance results in vibration, which in turn results in a conscious thought-process.

The thought-processes that arise as a result of this interruption are either (1) physical thought-processes that operate through the five sense doors (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body), or (2) mental thought-processes that operate through the mind, the sixth sense organ. Physical thought-processes are determined by the intensity, or impact, of the object that brings about the interruption of the stream of life continuum. In this sense, the largest obstruction will cause the longest thought-process, and the smallest obstruction will cause the shortest thought-process.

There are four types of physical thought-processes, from one that runs for seventeen thought-moments to one that fails even to reach the point of determination or identification of the object. There are two types of mental thought-processes: (1) one termed "clear," which runs through to retention, the final stage of thought-processes, and (2) one termed "obscure," which ends before the stage of retention. Depending on the intensity of the obstruction in the subconscious stream of life continuum, we have a more intensive and lengthier thought-process or a less intensive and briefer one.

Let us look at the seventeen thought-moments that make up the longest of any of the thought-processes, physical or mental. Remember that each of these thought-moments is said to last less than one billionth the time it takes to wink an eye. Thus

when the Buddha said that a living being endures only as long as a single thought-moment, he was talking about an extremely brief period of time.

The first of these seventeen thought-moments is termed "entry" and refers to an object impinging upon the stream of life continuum, or the placing of an object of obstruction in the river of life.

The second moment is termed "vibrating" because the entry of the object into the stream of life continuum sets up a vibration.

The third is the "arresting" moment because at this point the obstruction interrupts or arrests, the stream of life continuum.

Here we might ask how is it that the stream of life continuum (*bhavanga*), which has its own object that forms the basis of the factor of unification (*patisandhi*) and the factor of decay (*chuti*), comes to have a secondary object in the form of a material object of the senses. This is explained by means of an analogy. Buddhaghosa said that, just as tapping one grain of sugar among many scattered on the surface of a drum causes a vibration that affects a fly sitting on another grain of sugar on the drum, so material objects of the five physical senses impinge upon and set up vibrations that affect *bhavanga*.

Once these three moments—entry, vibration, and interruption or arresting—have taken place, the object enters the conscious sphere. It does this through the fourth thought-moment, which is the moment of the "adverting consciousness." In the case of the physical thought-processes, the adverting consciousness can be of five types—eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body.

This is succeeded by the fifth moment, the "perceiving consciousness," which can be of the five types—eye consciousness, ear consciousness, and so forth.

This is followed by the sixth moment, the "receiving consciousness"; the seventh moment, the "investigating consciousness"; and the eighth moment, the

"determining consciousness." It is the determining consciousness that identifies and recognizes the object of perception.

This determining consciousness is followed by seven moments of "impulse consciousness" (*javana*), which have the function of running through the object, thereby assimilating the object wholly into consciousness.

These ninth through fifteenth thought-moments are followed by two moments of resultant, retentive consciousness, for seventeen thought-moments in all. The seven moments of impulse consciousness are karmically active and can be wholesome or unwholesome. The moments of resultant, retentive consciousness, too, are either wholesome or unwholesome.

For the purpose of practice of the path, it is important to know at which point in these seventeen thought-moments one is able to act freely, for better or for worse. The three moments of *bhavanga* are resultant. The adverting consciousness and the determining consciousness are functional. The perceiving consciousness is resultant. Thus the seven moments of impulse consciousness (*javana*) are the first karmically active thought-moments. The first of these seven moments determines the next six, so if it is wholesome, the rest are wholesome, and if it is unwholesome, the rest are unwholesome, too.

It is at the point when determining consciousness is followed by the seven impulse moments that resultant or functional states give way to active states. This is the all-important point in thought-processes, because one cannot alter the character of resultant or functional states but can alter the character of active states, which have a wholesome or unwholesome karmic potential. At the moment when the *javana* moments commence, the presence or absence of wise attention is therefore very important. If wise attention is present, the probability of wholesome impulses is greater; if absent, unwholesome impulses are more likely to predominate.

The actual object of the seventeen thought-moments is of little importance here because the object in itself, no matter how desirable or undesirable, does not determine whether the seven impulse moments are wholesome or unwholesome. You may recall the case of the Elder Tissa (see Chapter 23). It happened that the daughter-in-law of a certain family, having quarreled with her husband, dressed in her best garments and jewelry and set out to return to her father's house. When she came upon the Elder Tissa, being of an irreverent nature, she let out a loud laugh. Seeing her teeth, Tissa reacted in terms of the perception of the foulness of the body, and by the strength of that perception won through to Arhatship on the spot. When the woman's husband came along and asked whether Tissa had seen a woman going that way, the Arhat replied that he was not aware whether it had been a man or woman but knew that he had seen a heap of bones walking along the road.

This story indicates that no matter what the nature of the determining consciousness, the seven moments of impulse consciousness can be an occasion for either winning through to the stage of Arhatship or for the further accumulation of moments of consciousness that have an unwholesome karmic value. To a man other than Tissa, the sight of the woman laughing might have given rise to impulses rooted in lust rather than ones leading to the realization of Arhatship. Since wise attention or the lack of it determines the karmic value of the impulse moments that follow, we need to apply wise attention to decrease the chances of unwholesome impulses arising and increase the chances of wholesome moments of impulse consciousness.

I would like to conclude by referring to a simile popularized by Buddhaghosa in his *Path of Purification* (*Visuddhi Magga*) to illustrate the seventeen moments of consciousness in a thought-process. Suppose a man has gone to sleep at the foot of a mango tree full of ripened fruit. A ripened mango is loosened from a branch and falls to the ground. The sound of the mango falling to the ground stimulates the ears of

the sleeping man, who awakes, opens his eyes, and sees the fruit lying not far from where he is. He stretches out his arm and takes the mango in his hand. He squeezes the mango, smells it, and then eats it.

This whole process illustrates the seventeen moments of perceiving a physical object. The sound of the falling mango impinging upon the man's ears is analogous to the three moments of *bhavanga*—entry, vibration, and interruption. When the man uses his eyes and spots the mango, this is analogous to the moments of adverting and perception; when he stretches out his hand to take the fruit, to the moment of receiving; when he squeezes the mango, to the moment of investigating; when he smells it, to the moment of determining; when he eats it and enjoys it, to the seven moments of impulse consciousness; and (although apparently Buddhaghosa did not do this) one might add that when he digests it, this is analogous to the two resultant moments of retention.

If we analyze our thought-processes carefully, and if through heedfulness we master them, this can result in a deepened understanding of the ultimate nature of things as impermanent and not-self. This analysis can also lead to mastery over the objects of the senses, the result of which is dispassion, joy, and freedom. We should therefore apply the knowledge we gain about the momentary, conditioned, and transient nature of the processes of thought and perception to our daily experience, in order to seek out that understanding and wise attention which will enable us to multiply our moments of wholesome karmic potential and minimize our moments of unwholesome karmic potential. If we can do this, we will have taken a very important step in extending our study of the Abhidharma from the merely intellectual sphere to the practical and experiential sphere.

Chapter Thirty-Eight
Analysis of Matter

The Abhidharma is supposed to deal with four ultimate realities—consciousness (*chitta*), mental states (*chetasika*), matter (*rupa*), and nirvana. Matter shares with consciousness and mental states the character of being a conditioned reality, whereas nirvana is an unconditioned reality. In considering the three conditioned realities, we can simultaneously treat the five aggregates of psycho-physical existence.

This harks back to what we said in Chapter 33 about the relationship between subject and object, mind and matter. Both these schemes can be reduced to two elements: the subjective or mental element, and the objective or material element. On the one hand we have mind and the mental states—consciousness, volition, perception, and feeling—and on the other hand we have the object—form, or matter.

In the context of the Abhidharma, it is important to remember that matter is not something separate from consciousness. In fact, mind and matter can be simply called the subjective and objective forms of experience. We will see more precisely why this is true when we consider the four essentials of matter (earth, water, fire, and air) as qualities of matter rather than as the substance of matter. Because Buddhism has a phenomenological approach to existence, matter is only important insofar as it is an object of experience that affects our psychological being. Whereas certain other systems assert a radical and absolute dualism, a dichotomy between mind and body, in Buddhism we simply have subjective and objective forms of experience.

In the classification and enumeration of matter in the Abhidharma, matter is

divided into twenty-eight elements. The four primary elements, or four essentials of matter, are simply called earth, water, fire, and air. However, earth might better be called "the principle of extension or resistance"; water, "the principle of cohesion"; fire, "the principle of heat"; and air, "the principle of motion or oscillation." These are the four primary building-blocks of matter. From them are derived the five physical sense organs and their objects.

In this context, as well as in the context of the five aggregates, matter refers not only to our bodies but also to the physical objects of experience that belong to the external world. Beyond organs and their objects, matter is also present in masculinity and femininity, in the heart, or the principle of vitality, and in nourishment. There are also six further elements of matter, which are: the principle of limitation or space, the two principles of communication (bodily communication and verbal communication), lightness, softness and adaptability. Finally, there are four elements that are termed "characteristics": production, duration, destruction, and impermanence.

There are thus twenty-eight components of matter or, to be more precise, of material experience, in all: the four essentials, the five sense organs and their corresponding objects, the two dimensions of sexuality, vitality, nourishment, space, the two forms of communication, lightness, softness and adaptability and the four characteristics.

Let us look more closely at the four essentials in terms of their reality as sensory qualities. It is important to remember that when we speak of the four primary elements of matter, we are concerned not with earth, water, fire, and air in themselves but with the sensory qualities of these elements—the qualities that we can feel and that give rise to the experience of matter. Thus we are concerned with sensory qualities like hardness and softness, which belong to the principle of

extension, and warmth and cold, which belong to the principle of heat. We are not dealing with essences. Rather, we are dealing with qualities that are experienced.

This means, in turn, that we are dealing with a purely phenomenological treatment of matter, in which sensory qualities function as the definitive characteristics of matter. It is the sensory qualities that constitute ultimate realities. In other words, it is neither the table nor my body, but the sensory qualities of hardness and softness that belong to both the table and my body, that give rise to the experience of matter. In this context, the objects of my experience (such as the table and my body) are conventional realities, whereas the sensory qualities of hardness, softness, and so forth that give rise to the experience of matter are ultimate realities.

This is what is called in philosophy a "modal view," a view that concentrates on the qualities of experience rather than on the essence of experience. To seek the essence of matter is to enter the world of speculation, to go beyond our empirical experience; to deal with the qualities of matter is to confine ourselves to phenomena, to experience. It is interesting to note that this modal view of matter is shared by some modern philosophers, Bertrand Russell perhaps being the best known among them. It is this modal view of reality which also informs much contemporary thought about matter. Scientists have come to recognize matter as a phenomenon, to recognize that it is impossible to arrive at the essence of matter, and this has been substantiated by the discovery of the infinite divisibility of the atom.

This modal view of reality has another important implication: Insofar as we take a purely phenomenological and experiential view of reality, of existence, the question of the external world—in the sense of a reality existing somewhere "out there," beyond the limit of our experience—does not arise. Insofar as the external world gives rise to the experience of matter, it is just the objective or material dimension of our experience, not an independent reality that exists in itself.

On a personal level, we find that our psycho-physical existence is made up of two components: the mental component, or the mind, and the physical component, or the body. The mind and the body differ somewhat in their nature—primarily in that the mind is more pliant and changeable than the body. The Buddha once said that we might be more justified in regarding the body as the self than the mind, because the body at least maintains recognizable features for a longer period of time.

We can verify this through our own experience. Our minds change much more quickly than our bodies. For example, I can make a mental resolution to refrain from eating starchy foods and fats, but it will take a considerable amount of time for that mental change to reflect itself in the shape of my body. The body is more resistant to change than the mind, and this is in keeping with the characteristic of earth, as represented in the principle of resistance. The body is the product of past karma, past consciousness, and is at the same time the basis of present consciousness. This lies at the heart of the uneasiness many intellectuals have felt about the body. A famous philosopher, Plotinus, once remarked that he felt like a prisoner in his own body, which he considered to be like a tomb.

Sometimes we would like to sit longer in meditation were it not for the physical discomfort we experience as a result of the body. Sometimes we want to work longer (or to stay awake to watch a particular television program) but cannot do so because of the weariness that accompanies the body. There is a tension between mind and body due to the fact that the body is the materialized form of past karma, and because of the body's characteristic of resistance, it responds much more slowly to volitional actions than does the mind. Thus the body is, in a sense, an impediment that hinders mental development.

We can see this clearly in the case of liberated beings. In *The Questions of King Milinda,* the king asks Nagasena whether Arhats can experience pain. Nagasena

replies that although Arhats no longer experience mental pain, they can still experience physical pain. Arhats no longer experience mental pain because the bases for mental pain (aversion, ill-will, and hatred) are no longer present, but they can experience physical pain as long as the basis for physical pain (the body) remains. Until an Arhat enters final nirvana—"nirvana without residue," without the psychophysical personality—the possibility of physical pain remains. This is why, in the accounts of the Buddha's life and the lives of his prominent disciples, there are occasions when they experienced physical pain.

The body has a peculiar, intermediate position, in that it is the product of past consciousness and the basis of present consciousness. This intermediate position is also reflected in the fact that some bodily functions are conscious and can be controlled by an act of will, while others are unconscious and proceed automatically. I can decide to eat another plate of food, but it is an unconscious bodily function that digests or fails to digest the meal; I cannot will my body to digest it.

Breathing, too, is representative of this intermediate position of the body, because breathing can be either an unconscious function or it can be raised to a volitional and conscious function for the purpose of concentrating and calming the body and mind. In coping with our existence as a composite of mind and body, we need to remember that the mind represents the dynamic, fluid, and volitional principle, while the body represents the principle of resistance. Because of this, it is not possible for the body to change as quickly as the mind in the process of development and liberation.

Chapter Thirty-Nine
Analysis of Conditionality

The analysis of relations, or conditionality, is as important as the analysis of consciousness and the other aspects of psycho-physical experience we have considered in the last few chapters. This analysis has often been neglected in studies of the Abhidharma, which is paradoxical if you remember that, of the seven books of the *Abhidharma Pitaka,* the *Book of Causal Relations (Patthana),* which deals with conditionality, is one of the largest. It is only by devoting sufficient attention to the analysis of conditionality that we can avoid some of the pitfalls of an overly analytical view of reality. I alluded to this in Chapter 32, when I devoted some time to examination and comparison of the analytical and the relational methods of investigation, which together make up the comprehensive approach of Abhidharma philosophy.

Perhaps because the analytical approach of the Abhidharma has received more attention than the relational, we find Abhidharma philosophy categorized as "realistic pluralism" by some scholars. This kind of categorization awakens all kinds of associations with movements of modern western philosophy, such as positivism and the work of Bertrand Russell. It implies that the result of Buddhist analysis is a universe in which numerous individual, separate, and self-existing entities exist in their own right and ultimately. While this may have been the view of some early schools of Buddhism in India, it is certainly not the view of mainstream Buddhism, whether Theravada or Mahayana.

The only way we can avoid this pluralistic, fragmentary view of reality is by taking due account of the relational approach outlined in the *Patthana* and also developed in the *Compendium of Relations* (*Abhidhammattha Sangaha*). By doing so, we will achieve a correct and balanced view of Buddhist philosophy, a view that takes into account the static and analytical aspect of experience as well as the dynamic and relational aspect.

The importance of understanding relations, or conditionality, is clearly indicated in the Buddha's own words. On a number of occasions the Buddha specifically associated the understanding of conditionality, or interdependent origination, with the attainment of liberation. He said that it is because of the failure to understand interdependent origination that we have so long wandered in this round of repeated rebirth.

The Buddha's enlightenment is frequently described as consisting of his penetrating the knowledge of interdependent origination. This very close connection between the knowledge of interdependent origination and enlightenment is further illustrated by the fact that ignorance is most frequently defined, both in the sutras and in the Abhidharma, as either ignorance of the Four Noble Truths or ignorance of interdependent origination. Now, the theme underlying both the Four Noble Truths and interdependent origination is conditionality or causality, the relation between cause and effect. Thus the knowledge of conditionality is equivalent to the destruction of ignorance and the attainment of enlightenment.

The analysis of conditionality in the Abhidharma tradition is treated under two headings: (1) the analysis of interdependent origination, and (2) the analysis of the twenty-four conditions. We will look at them separately and then together, to see how they interact, support, and inform each other.

I will not explain each of the twelve components of interdependent origination

here, since they are described in Chapter 10. I would, however, like to briefly mention the three fundamental schemes of interpretation of the twelve components: (a) the scheme that divides and distributes the twelve components over the course of three lifetimes—past, present, and future; (b) the scheme that divides the components into afflictions, actions, and sufferings; and (c) the scheme that divides the components into active (or causal) and reactive (or resultant) categories. In this third scheme, ignorance, mental formation or volition, craving, clinging, and becoming belong to the causal category and can belong to either the past life or the present life, while consciousness, name and form, the six senses, contact, feeling, birth and old age and death belong to the effect category and can belong to either the present life or the future life. Thus there is an analysis of cause and effect, or conditionality, in the formula of interdependent origination.

The twenty-four conditions are not mutually exclusive. Many of them are partly or entirely identifiable with one another. The only explanation for several instances of almost (if not completely) identical factors is the desire of the authors' to be absolutely comprehensive, so as to avoid the slightest possibility of neglecting a mode of conditionality.

Let us look at each of the twenty-four conditions in turn: (1) cause, (2) objective condition, (3) predominance, (4) contiguity, (5) immediacy, (6) simultaneous origination, (7) reciprocity, (8) support, (9) decisive support, (10) preexistence, (11) post-existence, (12) repetition, (13) karma, (14) effect, (15) nutriment, (16) control, (17) absorption, (18) path, (19) association, (20) disassociation, (21) presence, (22) absence, (23) separation, and (24) non-separation.

A distinction must be made between *cause*, or root cause, and condition. We need to look at the Abhidharma literature if we want to distinguish cause from condition, because in the Sutra literature the two terms seem to be used

interchangeably. Generally, we can understand the distinction by recourse to an analogy taken from the physical world: while the seed is the cause of the sprout, factors like water, earth, and sunlight are the conditions of the sprout. In the Abhidharmic treatment of conditionality, cause operates in the mental sphere and refers to the six wholesome or unwholesome roots—non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion and their opposites, greed, hatred, and delusion.

Objective condition refers generally to the object which conditions experience. For example, a visual object is the objective condition of visual consciousness. *Predominance* refers to four categories of mental or volitional activities—wish, thought, effort, and reason—which have an overriding influence on factors of experience.

Contiguity and *immediacy* are virtually synonymous and refer to the conditioning of a thought-moment by the immediately preceding thought-moment. Contiguity and immediacy also refer to the conditioning of a given state of mind or matter by the immediately preceding state of mind or matter. We can perhaps understand this better if we think of contiguity and immediacy in the sense of immediate proximity in time and space, respectively.

Simultaneous origination can be seen in the case of the mental aggregates of consciousness, volition, perception, and feeling, and also in the case of the four essentials of matter (earth, water, fire, and air). *Reciprocity* or mutuality refers to the mutual dependence and support of factors, as in the case of the legs of a tripod that depend on and support one another. *Support* means the basis of any particular factor, in the way that the earth is the support of trees or canvas is the support of a painting. But when simple support becomes *decisive support,* it should be understood in the sense of inducement in a particular direction. This will become clearer when we examine how the twenty-four modes of conditionality function in

relation to the twelve components of interdependent origination.

Preexistence or antecedence refers to the preexistence of factors that continue to exist after subsequent factors come into being. This is illustrated by the preexistence of the sense organs and objects of the senses, which continue to exist and thereby condition subsequent physical and mental experience. *Post-existence* complements preexistence and refers to the existence of subsequent factors such as mental and physical experience that condition preexisting factors like the sense organs and objects.

Repetition is important in the sphere of mental life and leads to skill or familiarity. This is exemplified in the seven moments of impulse consciousness (see Chapter 37). Repetition is particularly important in the sphere of wholesome and unwholesome action because it increases the force of wholesome or unwholesome thought-moments.

Karma is volitional action of a wholesome or unwholesome variety. *Effect* or result indicates that the reactive aspect of previous karma has an influence and serves to condition coexisting phenomena. It is interesting to note that even effects do, to a limited extent, function as conditions or as causes. This will become clear if we remember that we are considering the functional rather than the essentialistic definitions of such factors.

Nutriment refers to not only physical food, which is one of the conditions of the physical body, but also to mental food, such as impressions, which are the mental food of the aggregate of feeling. *Control* refers to confidence, mindfulness, and so forth, which master or control their opposites. *Absorption* refers not only to meditative absorption but also to absorption in a more general sense, which encompasses both wholesome and unwholesome absorptions. You may remember that the factors of absorption (*jhananga*) are not necessarily wholesome and pertain

not only to the states of meditative absorption but also to a general condition of intensification of consciousness, whether wholesome or unwholesome (see Chapter 34).

Path refers to the path leading to unhappy states encompassing wrong views, wrong effort, and so forth, and also to the Noble Eightfold Path. *Association* refers to the conditioning of a factor by a similar factor, whereas *disassociation* is the conditioning by a dissimilar factor, such as the way sweetness and bitterness, light and darkness condition each other. Thus conditionality is not only positive but also negative. In other words, a particular factor of experience is conditioned not only by factors that are similar but also by factors that are dissimilar.

Presence refers to the necessary existence of certain conditions in order that other phenomena occur. For instance, light must be present for the experience of a visible form to arise. *Absence* is, like disassociation, a negative form of conditionality. For example, the disappearance of light is a condition for the arising of darkness. *Separation* and *non-separation* are identical to disassociation and association, respectively.

The twenty-four modes of conditionality operate in conjunction with the twelve components of interdependent origination. For example, ignorance, the first of the twelve components, conditions volition, the second component, by way of two modes of conditionality: objective condition and decisive support.

This can be understood as follows: Volition can be meritorious or demeritorious, and ignorance functions as the decisive support of both. Ignorance functions as the decisive support conditioning meritorious volition if it is made the object of your meditation, in that the desire to free yourself from ignorance induces you to practice meditation and so forth. Conversely, if an unwholesome state of mind, such as greed (which is born of ignorance), becomes the object of your absorption, then ignorance

functions as the decisive support of demeritorious volition. If you then commit an unwholesome action (steal a cookie, say), it is because ignorance has functioned as a decisive supporting condition inducing you to create the unwholesome volition on which the unwholesome action was based. Ignorance can also condition volition by way of contiguity, repetition, and so forth.

Volition (the second component of interdependent origination) conditions rebirth consciousness (the third component) by means of karma and decisive support, while consciousness conditions name and form (the fourth component) through reciprocity and also by means of support. Thus each of the twelve components conditions the subsequent component in a particular way identifiable in terms of the twenty-four conditions. We could cite more examples, but they would only reiterate how these twenty-four modes of conditionality condition the twelve components of interdependent origination.

The idea at the heart of the teaching of interdependent origination and the teaching of conditionality is the avoidance of the two extremes, the erroneous views of eternalism and nihilism. The Buddha said that seeing the doer of an action and the one who experiences the fruit of that action as identical is one extreme, while seeing them as different is another extreme. He taught the avoidance of these two extremes when he taught the Middle Way, which emerges from an understanding of interdependent origination and conditionality.

If we examine the twelve factors of interdependent origination in the light of the twenty-four modes of conditionality, we find that in all twelve factors there is no self, but only processes conditioned by other processes—processes that are, in their actual nature, empty of self and substance. This understanding of the emptiness of self and substance is achieved through an understanding of conditionality.

It is in this sense that the consciousness belonging to this life and the

consciousness belonging to the next life are neither identical nor different. When we understand the relationship between this life and the next—between the doer of an action and the experiencer of an action—as one that cannot be described in terms of either identity or difference, we arrive at an understanding of the Middle Way.

The relationship between this life and the next is one of cause and effect, and the relation of cause and effect is one of neither identity nor difference. In this way we can successfully avoid both the extreme of belief in an eternal self and the extreme of rejection of the law of moral responsibility, or karma.

We can perhaps make this conditioned relationship between cause and effect clearer by looking at examples from daily life. Take the case of the seed and the sprout. The sprout originates dependent on the seed, but the sprout and the seed are neither identical nor different. They are obviously not identical, but by the same token, neither are they altogether different. Similarly, when a sound produces an echo, the two are not identical but neither are they altogether different. In the same way, this life and the next life are neither identical nor different; rather, the next life arises dependent on this life, volition, and ignorance.

In this process of conditioned arising, there is no persistent, permanent, and identical self, but neither is there an annihilation of the continuity of the process of cause and effect. If we can understand the relation between cause (or condition) and effect (or result) as a relation that cannot be described in terms of identity and difference, permanence and annihilation, we will understand emptiness, the Middle Way, and how not-self and insubstantiality are compatible with moral responsibility and rebirth.

Chapter Fouty
The Thirty-Seven Factors of Enlightenment

The thirty-seven factors conducive to enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiya dhamma*)are important for two reasons. First, according to tradition, they were recommended by the Buddha, shortly before his entry into final nirvana, as primary means of gaining enlightenment. Second, these factors form a fundamental part of the foundation of the Abhidharma, in that they belong to that category of teaching, like the teaching on the five aggregates, that comprises the Abhidharmic contents of the *Sutra Pitaka*.

In Chapter 30, we talked about the characteristics of the Abhidharma and the relation between Abhidharmic material and the contents of the discourses, or sutras. The factors conducive to enlightenment belong to this category of material, which is Abhidharmic in nature and yet found in the discourses. Thus they belong to the early period of Abhidharmic philosophy.

The thirty-seven factors of enlightenment are without doubt Abhidharmic in nature. All five characteristics of Abhidharmic material apply to them: (1) definition of factors, (2) relation of factors to other factors, (3) analysis of factors, (4) classification of factors, and (5) arrangement in numerical order (see Chapter 30).

The thirty-seven factors are classified under seven groups: (a) the four stations of mindfulness (*satipatthana*), (b) the four right efforts (*sammappadana*), (c) the four roads to power (*iddhipada*), (d) the five controlling faculties (*indriya*), (e) the five powers (*bala*), (f) the seven limbs of enlightenment (*bojjhanga*), and (g) the Noble

Eightfold Path (*atthangika magga*). Since we considered the four right efforts and the Noble Eightfold Path in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I will omit these two groups here and concentrate instead on the other five.

The Buddha called mindfulness the one way to the elimination of the afflictions. The Buddha has also said that the mind is the root of all virtues. The most important practice, therefore, is to discipline the mind. One can also understand the importance of mindfulness from the fact that mindfulness occurs in five of the seven groups that make up the thirty-seven factors conducive to enlightenment, and that the first of these groups is devoted exclusively to the four stations of mindfulness (*satipatthana*). Mindfulness is also taught in the *Satipatthana Sutta (The Discourse on the Stations of Mindfulness),* which occurs twice in the Buddhist canon. All this indicates the importance of mindfulness.

In recent years there has been a great resurgence of interest in the four stations of mindfulness both within the Theravada tradition, particularly in Burma, and also in the Mahayana tradition, where the importance of the four stations of mindfulness as a part of the practice of meditation has now come to be appreciated. One of the reasons these four stations have occupied such an important place in Buddhist meditation is that they lead to the realization of the three universal characteristics (impermanence, suffering, and not-self). Exactly how this works will become clearer once we enumerate the four stations: (i) mindfulness with regard to the body, (ii) mindfulness with regard to feeling, (iii) mindfulness with regard to consciousness, and (iv) mindfulness with regard to mental objects.

Mindfulness with regard to the body is more inclusive here than it is in the context of the forty traditional supports of meditation, where it occurs as one of the ten recollections but is restricted only to the body. Here it applies not only to mindfulness with regard to the body but also to mindfulness regarding the process

of inhalation and exhalation, the elements of matter, the decomposing body, and so forth.

Mindfulness with regard to feeling refers to the emotional contents of personal experience, to feelings that are pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent.

Mindfulness with regard to consciousness—or, to be more precise, mindfulness with regard to thought—implies observation of the arising and perishing of thoughts.

Mindfulness with regard to mental objects refers to the contents of consciousness, particularly concepts such as impermanence and the like.

With the first station of mindfulness, we exhaust the material dimension of personal experience, and with the three subsequent stations we exhaust the mental dimension of personal experience (i.e., the aggregates of consciousness, volition, perception, and feeling). The thorough application of mindfulness results in abandoning the three erroneous views (permanence, happiness, and self) and attaining insight into the three universal characteristics (impermanence, suffering, and not-self). Interpretations of the objects of the four stations of mindfulness vary according to the various traditions of Buddhist meditation. In general, however, the explanation here should be acceptable to most of the traditions.

Let us look at the four roads to power (*iddhipada*): (i) wish or desire, (ii) energy, (iii) mind or thought, and (iv) reasoning. These four factors are also found in the twenty-four modes of conditionality (see Chapter 39), where they are termed "predominant conditions" (*adhipati*). Both the "roads to power" and "predominant conditions" clearly suggest the power of the mind to influence experience.

A simple example is the power to control, up to a certain point, the movements of our bodies and the exercise of our speech. This is a case of the undeveloped power of the mind, desire, energy, and reason to control physical phenomena. When these

predominant factors are intensified by cultivation of the five factors of absorption (initial application, sustained application, interest, happiness, and one-pointedness)—particularly the intensification of one-pointedness, which occurs upon attaining the fifth stage of the form-sphere absorptions—they become roads to power.

Through intensification, the predominant factors lead to what are called mundane types of super knowledge and the supramundane knowledge. There are five types of mundane super knowledge: the ability to fly through the sky cross-legged, to walk on water, to move through the earth, to read the thoughts of others, and to recollect one's former lives. The supramundane knowledge is knowledge of the destruction of the defilements (*asava*), ignorance, and so forth. This is perhaps why it is sometimes said that the four predominant conditions may be either mundane or supramundane. If they are directed toward the mundane sphere, they result in the five types of mundane super knowledge, whereas if they are directed toward the supramundane sphere, or nirvana, they result in penetration of the Four Noble Truths and in the destruction of the defilements.

Like the four roads to power, the five controlling faculties (*indriya*)—(i) faith, (ii) energy, (iii) mindfulness, (iv) concentration, and (v) wisdom—are also found in the twenty-four modes of conditionality. In the *Book of Causal Relations (patthana),* the five controlling faculties are defined as dominating factors. There is a very close connection between the five controlling faculties and the four roads to power, as indicated by their mutual presence in the modes of conditionality and their similarity in the sense of controlling, dominating, or mastering.

The five faculties are called "controlling" because they are said to control or master their opposites: faith (or confidence) controls lack of faith (or doubt); energy controls laziness; mindfulness controls heedlessness; concentration controls

distraction; and wisdom controls ignorance. Like the four roads to power, the five controlling faculties can only really control their opposites when they are intensified by the factors of absorption. For instance, faith can only function as a controlling faculty when it is strengthened by the presence of the three factors of absorption of interest, happiness, and one-pointedness; and wisdom can only function effectively when it is strengthened by initial application, sustained application, and one-pointedness. These five factors of absorption strengthen and intensify the five controlling faculties so that the latter can function effectively to propel one toward enlightenment. Similarly, the five controlling faculties strengthen the five factors of absorption. For instance, concentration strengthens interest and happiness. Thus the relationship between the two sets of factors is one of reciprocal support and intensification.

Although the five controlling faculties are indispensable in bringing about the transformation from a doubtful, lethargic, heedless, distracted, and ignorant mode of being to an enlightened mode of being, they must be cultivated in a balanced way. What this means is that within the five controlling faculties there are factors that balance each other. For instance, faith and wisdom are a reciprocal pair: if faith is allowed to dominate wisdom, this results in a weakening of one's critical faculties, one's intellectual powers of analysis and investigation; and if wisdom is allowed to dominate faith, this diminishes confidence to the point of uncertainty and a lack of initial commitment to practice. Similarly, if energy is allowed to dominate concentration, this leads to agitation, and if concentration is allowed to dominate energy, this leads to sloth and torpor.

Thus faith, energy, concentration, and wisdom must be developed and maintained in a balanced manner, and the faculty that enables one to do this is mindfulness. Mindfulness is the watchdog that ensures the proper reciprocal,

balanced relationship between faith and wisdom, and between energy and concentration.

The next group of factors of enlightenment, the five powers (*bala*)—(i) faith, (ii) energy, (iii) mindfulness, (iv) concentration, and (v) wisdom—are numerically and terminologically identical to the five controlling faculties. These five factors are called powers because on this stage faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom become firm, steady, and powerful.

The Buddha indicated that the five controlling faculties and five powers are two aspects of the same thing, just as an island in the middle of a river can lead people to call one side of the river the eastern part and the other side the western part, even though the two parts of the river are one and the same. Similarly, the five controlling faculties and the five powers are one and the same. The five controlling faculties are potentialities that must be intensified and developed through their combination with the five factors of absorption. When they become firm and steady through this intensification, they can then be termed powers.

We might add that the five powers become absolutely unshakable only in the case of the noble ones (see Chapter 35). On becoming a stream-winner, for example, faith becomes an unshakable power because the fetter of doubt is removed.

Although only the five controlling faculties and five powers are listed in the thirty-seven factors, in the expanded Abhidharmic classification of the controlling faculties and powers, there are three more faculties added to the five already mentioned (mind, joy, and vitality), and two more powers (moral shame and moral dread, known collectively as "the guardians of the world"). Moral shame and moral dread are explained as one's own sense of moral uprightness and fear of censure or blame. They are called guardians of the world because, when developed to the level of powers, they become guardians of wholesome actions.

The last group we will consider here are the seven limbs of enlightenment (*bojjhanga*): (i) mindfulness, (ii) investigation, (iii) energy, (iv) interest, (v) tranquillity, (vi) concentration, and (vii) equanimity. Mindfulness again appears as one of the factors, and again it leads the group, because it is with mindfulness that the way to enlightenment begins.

Thus it is through awareness of one's situation that progress on the path begins. This progress is sustained through investigation—in this case, the investigation of factors.

Energy occurs here, as it did in the four roads to power, the five controlling faculties, and the five powers. Energy is essential to sustain the progress one makes along one's spiritual path. All too often, our efforts are sporadic; we make a great effort for a short period of time and then relapse for a much longer time. If progress is to be sustained it must be steady, and energy contributes to steady, consistent progress along the path.

The fourth factor, interest, which is also one of the five factors of absorption, is suffused with happiness, although it can best be understood more as interest than as joy or rapture per se (see Chapter 34).

Tranquillity in this context is the tranquillity of mind that results from eliminating the afflictions of ignorance, ill-will, and attachment.

Concentration is synonymous with one-pointedness, which is one of the five factors of absorption.

Equanimity is the elimination of the mind's tendency to wander. Like so many Abhidharmic terms, equanimity functions on a number of levels. At the level of feeling, it can be indifference. At the level of the cultivation of the Four Immeasurable meditations (*brahmavihara*), equanimity is even-mindedness toward sentient beings—the absence of attachment to near and dear ones, and the absence of aversion

to enemies. In the analysis of personal experience in the teaching on the five aggregates, equanimity is the neutralization of the eight worldly conditions (happiness and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, and fame and infamy). Here, in the context of the seven limbs of enlightenment, equanimity is that integrated and unshakable state of mind which is totally free of mind's habitual tendency to wander.

These thirty-seven factors were codified, preserved, and taught by generations of masters for one reason only: they were found to be useful and beneficial in developing one's mind, and particularly in aiding progress toward enlightenment. Whether we choose to concentrate on the four stations of mindfulness, the four efforts, the four roads to power, the five controlling faculties, the five powers, the seven limbs of enlightenment, or the Noble Eightfold Path, familiarity with these factors of enlightenment can manifestly and immediately aid our progress toward that goal.

Chapter Fouty-One
Abhidharma in Daily Life

In this last chapter I would like to focus on some of the ideas considered in Chapters 30 through 40, relating them to daily life and to our practice of the Buddha's teaching. I have discussed the Abhidharma extensively, and some of the material is rather technical. Although it may not be possible to make complete use of what we have learned, I hope it will remain in the corner of your mind, and that you will be able to return to it and use it as time goes by.

I would like to begin by drawing your attention to the fundamental orientation of the Buddha and Buddhism toward the whole question of spiritual progress. You will recall that the majority of the thirty-seven factors conducive to enlightenment (see Chapter 40) relate to effort and to the mind. The emphasis in Buddhism has always been on these two aspects, in marked contrast to other religious traditions, where the most frequent answers to the question of spiritual progress refer to fate or grace—in other words, to some power outside us (whether an impersonal, unseen power, like fate, or a personal power, like God) that determines our progress and destiny. Fate and grace were typical answers given by other traditions in the Buddha's time, and they remain so today. Such approaches have one thing in common: they rely on something outside us, over which we have little or no control.

The Buddha, however, taught that it is one's own mind and effort that determine one's progress and destiny. Mind and effort are the keys to self-development, as is clearly reflected in the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment. This is why it has often

been said that the mind is the most valuable thing we have. The mind has sometimes been likened to a wish-fulfilling gem, in that it can grant rebirth in fortunate or unfortunate states. It is on the basis of mind that one crosses the threshold of conditioned existence and enters the supramundane states of the noble ones. It is the mind which determines this, and it does so through intentional action, or karma—the expressed will of the mind, which results in the particular conditions in which we find ourselves.

We can also see the importance of the mind reflected in the four roads to power (see Chapter 40), which are mental factors that can affect and control matter. What we need to do is intensify, cultivate, and elevate the mind. We can see this clearly when we look at the five factors of absorption or intensification (*jhananga*) and the five hindrances (*nivarana*), two aspects of our ordinary, mundane consciousness (see Chapter 34). The five hindrances are typical of very low levels of conscious development, such as the consciousness of animals, which is saturated with these factors. The presence of these hindrances means that one's mind is totally conditioned and manipulated by various stimuli.

In opposition to these five hindrances are the five factors of absorption, which are also present even in the consciousness of animals. The five absorptions counter and eventually eliminate the five hindrances. Thus we can reduce the controlling power of the hindrances to whatever extent we can cultivate the absorptions.

In a sense, we are standing at a crossroads. All ten factors, hindrances and absorptions, are present in our minds, and it is a question of whether we allow the hindrances to dominate or develop the factors of intensification so that they begin to dominate our minds. This is a very important battle because as long as the hindrances predominate we are very likely to see the results in this life and in the next life, in the form of rebirth in unfavorable or miserable states. But if our minds

are raised by cultivating the five factors of absorption, we reach a higher level of development in both this life and the next.

Once we have intensified and elevated the power of our minds by developing the five factors of absorption, we can motivate and direct our minds in a particular direction. This is done through the five controlling faculties: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom (see Chapter 40). It has been said that, to practice the Dharma, two things are essential: (1) faith and (2) wisdom. Wisdom is the main thing, while faith is the prerequisite. In some non-Buddhist traditions, faith means blind adherence, but in the Buddhist tradition, faith means confidence in the possibility of success. In other words, if we do not believe we can succeed, there will be no chance of achieving success no matter what we try to do. In this sense spiritual practice without faith is like a burned seed that will never put forth the seedling of spiritual progress, no matter how rich the soil or how carefully we tend it.

Faith and wisdom are the first and last of the five controlling faculties. Together with the remaining three faculties of energy, mindfulness, and concentration, they are present in the Noble Eightfold Path (see Chapters 5, 6, and 7). Energy, mindfulness, and concentration correspond to the three factors of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration of the mental development group of the Eightfold Path.

Faith is related to the morality group of the Eightfold Path because it is faith, after all, which compels us to observe the rules of good conduct and believe in the law of karma at the beginning of our practice. Unless and until we have achieved supernormal levels of consciousness (like the Buddha and his foremost disciples, who were able to directly perceive the effects of wholesome and unwholesome actions), we must rely on faith to create the foundation of our practice of morality.

Wisdom corresponds exactly to the wisdom group of the Eightfold Path. In the

five controlling faculties, therefore, we have in germinal form the eight steps of the Noble Eightfold Path.

To summarize, to progress toward our goal of enlightenment, we need to intensify, elevate, and motivate our minds. The way we can do this is (1) to cultivate the five factors of absorption to reduce the influence of the five hindrances, and then (2) to develop the five controlling faculties and connect them to our practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. When the five controlling faculties become unshakable, they develop into the five powers (see Chapter 40), which bring with them the supramundane states of the noble ones.

Wisdom, which is the last group of practice in the Noble Eightfold Path, is particularly relevant to the Abhidharmic studies we have undertaken because wisdom is the understanding of ultimate reality, and the Abhidharma is concerned with the presentation of ultimate reality. When we speak of wisdom, we have two components principally in mind: (1) not-self and (2) emptiness.

We have discussed the analytical and relational approaches to the analysis of personal experience in the teaching of not-self and in the teaching of dependent origination, respectively. When we consider not-self, we need to think of the self in relation to the five aggregates. Just as the erroneous idea of a snake exists dependent on and in relation to the rope and darkness, so when we look for the self in relation to the aggregates, we find that it does not exist in any way. The self cannot be found in any of the aggregates of consciousness, feeling, perception, volition, and form. The self cannot possess the aggregates in the way we might own a car. The self does not control the aggregates. It does not control the mind, nor does it control the body. The self is not in any way ascertainable within or without the aggregates.

Having arrived at this understanding of not-self, we might look for a moment at the aggregates. At this point, we move from an analysis of personal experience in

terms of the five aggregates to an analysis of the five aggregates in terms of dependent origination. The five aggregates do not originate by chance, nor do they originate without any cause. They originate dependently—dependent on the afflictions (ignorance, craving, and clinging) and on karma, volition, and becoming.

It has been said that interdependent origination is the greatest treasure of the Buddha's teaching. Understanding interdependent origination is the key to undoing the knot that has kept us bound for so long in samsara. The Buddha himself said that he who sees interdependent origination sees the Dharma, and that he who sees the Dharma sees the Buddha. This is a very encouraging remark, for if we can begin to see our daily experience in terms of interdependent origination—in terms of the conditioned, relative, and empty nature of the factors of experience—then we will see the Dharma, and through seeing the Dharma, we will see the Buddha. It will then no longer be true to say that we cannot see the Buddha, that the Buddha is not present here and now.

I hope that this study of the Abhidharma will not remain an intellectual exercise but will be applied to our daily lives, however slightly. Although it may be difficult to apply everything covered in the course of these last twelve chapters, I think all of us who have studied the Abhidharma will no longer make the mistake of thinking of reality in terms of a unitary, independent, and permanent self and the essential, substantial objects around us. Insofar as we have moved toward a new way of understanding reality in terms of factors and functions that are interdependent and relative, we have moved some way toward seeing the Dharma and the Buddha.

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and finally be reborn together in
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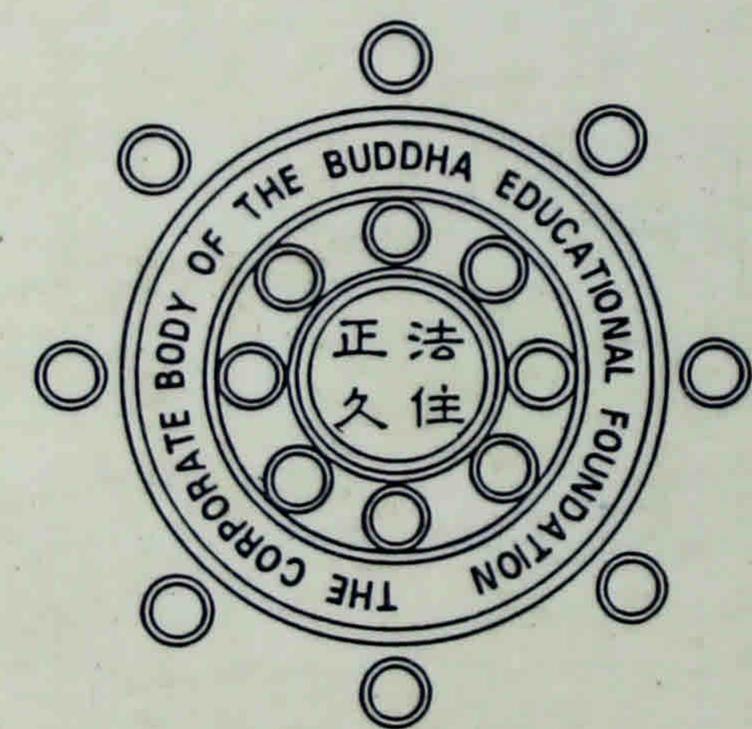

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