

Buddhist Psychology of Self Liberation

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Preface: What is this Book About?

What is the book about? Where did it come from?

In the Buddhist view, we seek happiness but rarely find it because of our mistaken conceptions about reality. Achieving lasting happiness is possible, provided we develop unmistaken conceptions about reality and speak and act in accordance with those conceptions. Understanding and then changing the mind so it holds unmistaken conceptions is called "self liberation" because understanding reality frees us from the painful consequences of our own errors.

This is the first of two books on Buddhist views about mental transformation. It consists of an interwoven group of essays on the theory of mental transformation. The second book contains essays on the practice of mental transformation.

Buddhism is very ecological, it asserts that everything depends on other things. This book depends on what I have learned from my teachers and what I have learned from over 40 years of practicing the mental transformation techniques they have taught me. Except for its organization, very little is original.

Over the course of my practice of meditation I have learned the truth of what I was taught, that to be lasting, our happiness must be mutual. Simply put, I am sharing what I have learned with you because we are all connected and no one is truly free unless everyone is free.

Americans move around a lot and often get disconnected from their families and roots. But meditators take their spiritual parents with them. These are my spiritual parents, in the order they came into this life, and to whom no words can sufficiently express my gratitude:

Tich Tien-An,
Swami Rudrananda,
Swami Pranananda,
Geshe Sonam Rinchen,

H.H. the Fourteenth Dalai Lama,
Tara Tulku Khensur Rinpoche,
Denma Locho Rinpoche,
ZaChoeje Rinpoche.

My dear wife Kayla has been my spiritual partner, ever present even when distant, our hearts and minds incomprehensibly connected.

-- David

Hinayana Buddhism: The Emptiness of Persons

The earliest scriptural tradition of Buddhism is found in the Pali language scriptures, which have been handed down to modern times by the Theravada Buddhists of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. These scriptures are the foundational teachings of all later forms of Buddhism, and therefore are a good starting place for a more detailed study of Buddhism.

In contemporary times only the Hinayana school of Buddhism has been flourishing in Southeast Asia, but that was not always the case. The spread of Buddhism across Asia was a long and complex process, and at one time or another all the major forms of Buddhism existed throughout the differing regions of Asia, no matter what forms were surviving into contemporary times. For example, the monumental mandalic pyramid of Borobudur in Java is one form of proof of the existence of Mahayana and Vajrayana in Southeast Asia, and there is scriptural evidence also. The 10th/11th century Indian teacher Atisa, who was so important for the development of Buddhism in Tibet, spent a dozen years studying and practicing the Mahayana disciplines of Altruism (Bodhicitta) under the guidance of a master in Java. And Kobo Daishi, the 7th century founder of Shingon in Japan, studied under the Chinese Hui Guo, who had himself been trained by Buddhist monks from Java.

Buddhist Origins: a Systematic Psychology for Liberation

Buddhism is distinguished from any other religion or spiritual system by a view of Reality and the human condition which was discovered by a person called Shakyamuni, who lived in India a little over 2,500 years ago. His view was not a revelation sent to him from some divine source but a realization or a change of consciousness and perception which resulted from a process of self-cultivation. He described the culmination of the process as becoming "enlightened" or as "waking up" to an awareness of Reality from the dream of appearances. The name Buddha is applied to Shakyamuni because it refers to his "awakened state." It is a tenet of Shakyamuni Buddha that anyone can become a Buddha by transforming how they think, speak and act.

The Buddhist view is that just as our dream dramas are a product of our history, desires and circumstances, so our everyday experience can be described as being dreamlike because our everyday experience is as much determined by our desires, aversions and confusion as it is determined by the objective reality of the various phenomena we perceive. "Desires, aversions and confusion/delusion" are sometimes called the "three poisons" and represented symbolically as the axial center of instructional paintings called "the wheel of life" as a cock, pig and snake. The great Tibetan scholar/saint Tsongkhapa wrote a short poem we will be reading called The Three Principal Aspects of the Path, which three aspects eradicate the three poisons: desire is eradicated by renunciation, aversion is eradicated by the altruistic wish to achieve enlightenment and ignorance is eradicated by the wisdom of the correct view.

This formulation is simply another version of the core Buddhist doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, which concerns the causal relationship between suffering and liberation from suffering: 1) we experience our existence as unsatisfactory and suffering in character, 2) there is a cause for this suffering, 3) upon the cessation of the cause, the effect of suffering is extinguished, 4) there is a path to bring about this cessation. Usually the path is described as having eight aspects, but Tsongkhapa boils them down to three aspects.

The Four Noble Truths are expressed in a further expansion as The Twelve Links of Dependent Origination. Here the doctrine of the causal relationship of the effect -- unsatisfactory, suffering existence -- and its causes -- desires, aversions and confusion is laid out in greater detail. The doctrine takes the name "dependent origination" rather than "causality" because it traces the way suffering arises in dependence on causes rather than the way causes produce the effect of suffering. The principle is the same, it is merely the way it is described, from effect to cause, rather than from cause to effect as we tend to do in the West.

The twelve links are ignorance, mental formations (also called "karmic formations"), consciousness, name & form, the six senses, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth and old age & death. Each link arises in dependence on the previous link, so, for example, old age & death arise in dependence on birth. Or as we would say in the West, you must first be born before you can grow old and die.

The relationship of the three poisons, four truths and twelve links might seem a bit confusing in its analytic, verbal format. Perhaps this is the reason Buddhists began to express this relationship metaphorically and visually in the form of paintings called The Wheel of Life. The Wheel of Life images place the three poisons in the center (the hub), the six realms of rebirth in the middle (in the spaces between the spokes) and the twelve links of dependent origination in sequence around the rim. The main point of the image is to demonstrate that life is a cycle (i.e., cyclic existence, samsara) which rotates on an axis. The three poisons are the axis on which the cycle rotates, causality/dependent origination is its operating principle. Together they ceaselessly drive a being through the six realms of existence. In most images the Wheel of Life is held in the mouth, hands and feet of Yama, the Lord of Death. After all, death does in fact rule the world, and this image is the metaphoric, symbolic expression of this fact. Liberation from the samsaric wheel of existence is accomplished through achieving the wisdom which sees through confusion and delusory appearances. The symbolic, metaphoric expression of this wisdom is Yamantaka (literally: the killer of death), the personification of the wisdom which sees through appearances, thus -- again symbolically -- slaying Death and his samsaric cycle.

What the Buddha discovered when he woke up was that there is a cause for our living in our confused, dreamlike state rather than our living in Reality. And because our confused state of awareness is the result of a cause, if this cause could be removed our resultant dreamlike awareness would disappear and we would be able to perceive Reality as it is in itself. This is expressed as the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, which are discussed below.

Why would anyone care if they perceived a real world rather than a dreamlike world? After all, many people spend a tremendous amount of time and money getting away from supposed "everyday reality" by watching television, taking vacations, drinking alcohol, and so forth. The Buddhist answer is that the way most people live their lives makes them unhappy rather than happy because their behavior is based on negative habit patterns and the confusion arising from erroneous notions about what is Real. If people could perceive Reality for what it is, they would think, speak and act in ways which made them happy. And in fact happiness is what most people seek. So if confusion, which is the root cause of unhappiness, is removed, unhappiness would cease. The Buddha also saw this connection between

confusion and unhappiness when he woke up.

So then, what is this confusion all about? The Buddha said that one form of this confusion is a matter of not seeing that everything depends on something else. For example, if everything has a cause, then everything depends on its cause or causes, and nothing is independent. Moreover, things are not just dependent on the causes of the past, they are also dependent on the elements out of which they are assembled and the names by which we come to recognize them as being different from other things. Because the things we experience are dependent in these three ways they are not independent. However, we spontaneously perceive them as if they were independent. That is what the Buddha meant by confusion. Perceiving things as lacking independence, or as the Buddha said, being "empty" of independence, is seeing them as they really are. When a person awakens from the dream of perceiving things as independent to the Reality of perceiving things being interdependent, they also have awakened from their confused states.

Awakening from confusion is also called "liberation" from unhappiness, because behaviors arising from confusion lead to unsatisfying, unhappy results, while behaviors arising from correct notions about what is Real can lead to happiness. Buddha affirmed the law of cause and effect, i.e., that all causes must produce results, and since it is observable that we experience both happiness and unhappiness which cannot be accounted for by the actions of this life alone, there must have been causes for happiness and unhappiness which preceded this life. And since it makes no sense that our happiness or unhappiness would be the result of the actions of anyone but ourselves, so we must have lived before the arising of this current body. And if it is the case that we lived before the arising of this current body, so it would logically follow that we will have other bodies in the future. This is called "rebirth".

Over the centuries Buddhists have explored the problem of rebirth, usually seeking to avoid the unhappiness associated with continued rebirth in unfavorable circumstances. Buddhists have also developed differing ideas about what it is that gets reborn. After all, if unenlightened people such as ourselves only perceive appearances and not Reality, then our perceptions about ourselves must also be suspect. For example, we generally feel like independent beings who remain the same in spite of the changes in our bodies and minds as we age. What is it that feels the same? If we are confused about the things we perceive, wouldn't it make sense that we are confused about the part of us that "feels the same?" And if we don't even clearly know about ourselves as we are in this moment, how are we going to understand what it is that gets reborn? Different traditions of Buddhism have answered these questions differently in accordance with the needs of differing cultures and times. This is one source of apparently differing philosophical views in Buddhism.

Although differing philosophical views have developed over the centuries, the goals of liberation and enlightenment have been consistent among Buddhists, even if the religious practices for achieving these goals also have varied. Buddhists refer to these differing views and practices as "vehicles" because they carry one to the goals of liberation and enlightenment. There are two main types of vehicles: cause vehicles & effect vehicles. Followers of cause vehicles assert that liberation and Buddhahood are achieved by accumulating their causes, which are wholesome habits of perception and behavior. Followers of effect vehicles assert that liberation and Buddhahood can only be effects of these accumulated causes if they are potential in all beings. Thus they assert that liberation and Buddhahood can be achieved through practices which remove the confusion that covers these potentials of liberation and Buddhahood. In a sense, followers of both vehicles are doing similar things, there simply being a difference in their emphasis on particular practices and philosophical views.

The Hinayana or Theravada tradition of Buddhism, that of the "elders," is a cause vehicle which emphasizes the achievement of liberation through the practice of wholesome habits of perception and behavior. It also emphasizes the philosophical view that confused ideas about what is a person are the main things which create negative behaviors; so this tradition emphasizes insight into the real nature of the person as a method for liberation from unhappiness. Although historically followers of this tradition lived throughout Asia, in recent centuries they mainly have been found in South and Southeast Asian countries, such as the current Sri Lanka and Thailand. In the United States, this tradition's teachings often are referred to as "vipassana," or "insight meditation."

At one time the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, the "Great Vehicle," could be found in all the countries of Asia, although in recent centuries followers of this tradition mainly have been found in Central and East Asian countries such as Tibet, China, Mongolia, Korea and Japan. Mahayana emphasizes dependence on and devotion to saintly teachers called "Bodhisattvas" who have achieved high levels of self-cultivation. Mahayana also emphasizes the philosophical view that people not only are confused about the nature of the person, but they are confused about the nature of all the phenomena they perceive, and removing all these sorts of confusion is required for achieving Buddhahood. In Mahayana there are cause vehicles, effect vehicles, and conjoined cause and effect vehicles. Mahayana traditions which emphasize devotion to the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas are examples of cause vehicles.

There are several traditions of conjoined cause and effect vehicles in Mahayana. Shingon in Japan and tantra, or Vajrayana, in Tibet and Mongolia are conjoined cause and effect vehicles which assert that liberation can be achieved through practices which reveal or uncover the Buddhahood which is potential or covered in each person. For example, rituals such as chanting and visualizing one's

Buddha-nature are employed to uncover this potential. At the same time, these rituals transform negative habit patterns, thus accumulating the causes of awakening. Tantrayana is an alternative term to Vajrayana.

Zen is a Mahayana effect vehicle. Originally developed in China and later also practiced in Korea and Japan, this tradition asserts that the potential Buddhahood within each person is covered by the inattentive and thinking mind. Thus, stilling the mind through meditation practices is emphasized because restraining and focusing the mind will reveal the potential Buddha within.

All Buddhist traditions have agreed that confusion is the root cause of unhappiness and that its removal liberates one from unhappiness. But one of the problems with being confused is that one is too confused to know how to go about removing confusion! That is why all traditions emphasize the importance of a teacher to guide one through this process. The Buddha founded the world's first monastic order, and over the centuries Buddhist monks and nuns have had the opportunity to devote themselves to practices which remove confusion and bring about liberation. Having the greatest opportunity to practice self-cultivation, they usually also have been the most qualified to serve as religious teachers and guides for the householder Buddhist, who also wished to engage in practices leading to liberation.

Traditionally the Buddha is considered the greatest of all teachers. Since his departure from life in this world, his recorded teachings and the community of monks and nuns have been the source of guidance for Buddhists. These three -- Buddha, his teaching and the community of his followers -- are referred to as the "three gems." Taking refuge in the three gems, relying on the three gems for guidance in achieving liberation, is what makes a person a Buddhist.

Buddhists believe that mental consciousness is the essential feature of Buddha-nature. They also believe that all living beings are conscious, sensing beings, and so have a Buddha-nature and are potentially Buddhas. Thus, reverence for all human and non-human life has characterized Buddhists historically. They were among the first vegetarians in India and Buddhist art has often emphasized the interdependence of humans and their natural environment and the need for modest utilization of the earth's resources -- messages which are of profound importance in our time of ecological imbalance and resource depletion.

Buddha and His Enlightenment

So who was the Buddha, and how did he transform himself and gain the ability to perceive both reality and appearance? His ability arose from his "waking up," becoming "enlightened."

This experience is described in rather flowery terms in the *Buddhacarita*, a text which postdates the Buddha by 500 years, but is based on traditional teachings about his life. According to this text, Siddhartha Gautama, the original name of the Buddha to be, renounced the householder's life at age 29 and set out on a religious quest that was marked by ascetic practices and mental disciplines which are generally known to us under the term "yoga." The text tells us that he attained mastery of two kinds of yogic concentration exercise under two different masters. Under the first master he attained a state of "nothing at all." Under the second master he attained a state of "neither perception nor nonperception." These were later known as the seventh and eighth dhyana(s) (concentrations), respectively. The mastery of these forms of concentration did not, however, satisfy Shakyamuni's religious quest, a significant point, for here he breaks with the tradition prevalent at his time which taught that the mastery of subtle states of concentration would liberate one from the sorrows of the world.

Next, he set out on a long fast (as a form of purification), but gave that up as merely weakening the mind. Finally, seating himself under what later came to be called the "bodhi tree," he vowed not to move from that spot until he had attained his goal. Shortly thereafter Mara, a god who is the personification of lust and death, attempted to budge Shakyamuni from his seat, but touching the ground with one hand, Shakyamuni remained immovable. In an interpretive sense, we may say that the meaning of this tale of the attack of Mara is that having vowed not to move until he attained freedom, Shakyamuni was immediately beset with impulses deriving from his own instincts to live, which were threatened by his vow of immovability. In touching the earth he calls to witness the previous compassionate actions performed in his lives on earth which provided the strength (i.e., his store of merit derived from altruistic activity) to resist his own desire for life.

As night began, he ascended the eight stages of concentration known as the "eight dhyanas (s)," which he had mastered under his teachers, and during the four divisions of the night achieved a deepening understanding of the nature of existence, which understanding constituted his enlightenment. It is the content of his enlightenment experience which formed both the basis of his teaching and his authority to teach. It may be said that the entire subsequent history of the *Buddhadharma* (the Sanskrit term for what we call "Buddhism") is simply a progressive explanation,

systematization and interpretation of this experience.

In the first watch of the night Shakyamuni saw all of his previous lives. As the text says, he saw that in such and such a place he had such and such a name and lived a certain life history. That is, he directly perceived all his previous lives, almost as if reviewing a motion picture series of biographies in total detail.

In the second watch of the night he obtained the divine wisdom eye and saw the whole universe of birth and death as if in a mirror. That is, he directly perceived, with the clarity and passivity of a mirror, the death and rebirth of all beings. Particularly importantly, he saw that of the six realms into which beings could be reborn, the realm into which they were in fact reborn was the result of their own actions: their rebirths were determined by their own karma, a word which literally means "action."

In the third watch of the night he obtained the extinction of the outflows and perceived the more detailed operation of karma. The text says that he perceived the four truths and the twelve links of dependent origination, which formulations are the detailed working out of the law of karma and the truth of selflessness -- i.e., the truth that nothing is autonomous, that everything is interdependent, composed of parts, etc.

Finally, in the fourth watch of the night he obtained omniscience, and when the sun rose, he was Siddhartha Gautama no longer, but a Buddha, "an enlightened one," "an awakened one."

We may interpret this enlightenment experience as a progressive unfoldment of a single truth about existence, whose implications are amplified over the course of the night. When the whole of this truth and all of its implications are not just comprehended, but directly perceived, the goal of the religious quest has been obtained. What is this one truth? Most simply put, it is causality and all its implications, but certainly not causality as we understand it. The causality that the Buddha speaks of is "interdependence" or "interdependent origination." Formally, this causality is described by the following standard formulation:

When this is present, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises. When this is absent, that does not come to be, on the cessation of this, that ceases. (Majjhima Nikaya, 1.262)

This is not causality in the sense of some mechanistic physics of western science where the action of one object powers the action of some other object, much like one billiard ball striking another billiard ball and setting it in motion. Something else is being described by the Buddha which can be best understood through the use of an example derived from his enlightenment experience.

As I wrote above, in the third watch of the night of Shakyamuni's enlightenment he perceived the more detailed operation of karma, which took the form of his perceiving the four truths and the twelve links of dependent origination. These are the working out of karma and the truth of selflessness because they describe the way that compounded phenomena arise as the result of causes and conditions, and cease when those causes are removed or "cease" or are "extinguished" to use the Buddhist language. We will turn to a discussion of the Four Noble Truths and twelve links of dependent origination in the next section "The Person and Selflessness."

The Person and Selflessness

If we consider the core doctrines of the four noble truths and the twelve links of dependent origination we will note that although they are dynamic descriptions of the relations between motivation, habits, actions and consequences, nowhere do these doctrines make mention of a person or a self to whom these consequences occur, although the occurrence of consequences for actions is certain (as the Buddha saw in the second watch of the night). This apparent omission is quite intentional, for in the third watch of the night the Buddha not only perceived the operation of the twelve links and the Four Noble Truths, but also the unreality of the sense of selfhood, or what is called the truth of selflessness. What does this selflessness mean?

The place to start is with the Four Noble Truths. On the night of his enlightenment the Buddha saw that there was a way out of the cycle of existence, a way to "get off the wheel," or stop its turning. Because each of the twelve links of dependent origination is a condition upon which the others depend, if any of these conditions could be destroyed, the entire cycle would cease. This cessation of the cycle is what he called "nirvana," or liberation, and it can come about precisely because each of the twelve conditions arises in dependence upon the others: if one link were to cease, so the whole interdependent chain would break.

The Buddha expressed this formally as the "Four Noble Truths," which was his perception on the night of his enlightenment that because suffering and the unpleasantness of existence (the first truth) depends upon ignorant grasping (the second truth), so upon the cessation of this ignorant grasping, the unpleasantness would also cease (the third truth). This cessation is, again, referred to as "nirvana," a term which literally means "blowing out," i.e., the blowing out or cooling of the passions, the ignorant grasping after satisfaction. He also saw how to bring this cessation about, which is, formally, the Buddhist path (the fourth truth), that is, what one can do to break the chain of the twelve links of interdependent origination.

To return to the question of the "missing person," we can begin to answer this question about the meaning of "selflessness" by looking for the closest thing to a "person" in the twelve links which the Buddha perceived in the third watch of the night (in which he also perceived the truth of selflessness). The closest thing to a person in the twelve links is "name and form" (the fourth link). Form means matter. When we perceive something, it is this form or matter which, at base, we are actually perceiving. It is also the basis for the human body, the compound of various organs, bones, etc. which is the physical basis of a "person." "Name" is the consciousness which does the perceiving of forms: it is what is commonly referred to as "mind." Like the body, it is not a unity, but rather a compound of various factors which are generally grouped into four classes. These four are: feelings, of which there are

either pleasant feelings, painful feelings, or feelings which are neither pleasant nor painful; perceptions, of which there are six, in accordance with their sense organ basis (note that mind is considered a sense organ; more about this later); karmic (mental) formations or habits, of which there are many categories which are meant to include all the traces of previous experience plus some basic characteristics of the functioning of attention and memory; and raw consciousness itself, pure awareness unmolded by the karmic formations or perceptions, which are other classes. One will immediately note that these classes (which are called "aggregates," or in Sanskrit: skandhas) include four of the other eleven links, although the perception skandha differs slightly from the link of the six sense fields, as the link designates the organs of perception while the skandha refers to the perceiving of objects, and the consciousness skandha differs from the consciousness link as it is consciousness considered in the abstract, without the molding effect of the karmic formations.

What we have here are two intersecting descriptive systems. The skandha system is static and analytic; it is a group of categories which describes the components, as it were, which make up a person. The twelve links system is dynamic: it describes the way the skandha(s) interact in the course of the unfoldment of human existence and how they affect each other over time.

Nowhere in the skandha description do we find reference to a person. One could identify a subjective thought "I" within this system as a memory or name, in which case it would fall into the karmic formations skandha. Or one could identify that thought "I" as an object of perception of the mind sense, in which case it would fall into the perception skandha. But nowhere would there be found an organ or entity, as it were, which was an actual "I" or "ego" or "self." It is this self which is nowhere to be found as an actual entity, but is to be found merely as a designation or label applied to, or imputed on, subjective experiences, which is identified by the Buddha in his teaching of the selflessness of the person. What the Buddha saw in the third watch of the night was that the being which we take to be a person was simply the five skandha(s) arising and ceasing over many continued existences. Nowhere was an actual entity "person" or "self" to be identified; thus beings are empty of a self, or "selfless."

Now, the Buddha did not say that there was no subjective "I," but rather that there was no actual person to act as a referent for the concept "I," that, rather, there was merely the collection of aggregates which was designated as a person through the habitual use of the concept "I."

Perhaps an example will help.

Think of the relationship of the forest and the trees. Is there a forest apart from the trees? The term forest is something which describes a grouping of trees but that there is no such objective thing as a forest apart from the trees.

In similar fashion, Buddhists would assert that there is no subjective self (ie, "me") apart from the label "me" and the aggregation of parts which the label "me" designates. The obvious difference of course is that the forest is not reflexively designating itself "forest" while I am reflexively designating myself "me." Yet Buddhists assert that, fundamentally, the metaphor holds in spite of our feeling that there is a difference. In fact, that strong certainty and feeling we have that there is a difference between the reality of "forest" designated on the aggregated bunch of trees and "me" designated on the aggregated elements of body and mind is the common experience of the ignorance which creates all the sufferings of grasping, attached desire, hatred and so forth.

Perhaps it would help to perform what Albert Einstein called a thought experiment. In your imagination, try to see a forest in as much detail as possible. As you do so, begin to look at each of the individual trees which comprise the forest. When you do this, do you see the forest any more? As soon as I ask this question, do you see the individual trees or only a group of vague shapes which aggregate as a green and brown mass of forest? In your imagination you can watch yourself go back and forth between seeing trees and forest.

Now of course you can still assert that the process of labeling a person with an identity or the process of subjective labeling of internal experience is different than labeling a forest because subjects ACT in the world and this proves that this is not at all a delusory process. A classic Buddhist example used here is that of a leader of an organization. Presumably there is a manager in your workplace who is your "boss." That person is your boss when s/he is appointed to the position and when you are appointed to the position of that person's subordinate. If they are fired, they are no longer "boss". In fact they will no longer have the subjective feeling boss and if you run into them in a restaurant you will treat them very differently after they are fired than before. Yet when they were boss, many powers and capacities seemed to "adhere" to them. But actually those powers had nothing to do with them as such, those powers had to do with their role in a specific context, which role is expressed as a label. But you also know that that role becomes owned by people and that they carry it around with them even when away from the workplace. They might do this by "bossing" other people around, like bossing members of their family. Isn't that pretty delusory?

You could accept that this sort of labeling is delusory, but still argue that the subjective label

"me" is not delusory because you have such a strong sense of yourself as the author of your life and subject of your experience. Are you the subject of your experience when you are in dreamless sleep? You have no experience at all, but you can be pretty sure that your body and environment did not disappear when you fell asleep. You may say that it is simply that you were unconscious when you were asleep but that your subjective self was still there. But where? If your mind or consciousness has disappeared then only your body is left. If the subject "me" still exists, then does this mean that you are your body and not your mind? If you say no, then are you your mind, which has disappeared, and not your body? The Buddhist answer is that you are just the designation "me" on body and mind. That conjoined complex of body, mind and label "I" is what is feeling like the agent of your actions and experiences.

Now we might also say that this is bizarre, that a mere label or designation cannot perform any actions, but then think back to the boss example. Think about a big boss, such as the president of the USA. When he takes the oath of office he is designated as president by everyone and has huge power as a result of that designation. As soon as the oath expires, he has no power whatsoever. It is the commonly accepted label "president" designated on that person which confers the power to act in vast ways. Nothing more. So labels are very powerful and can perform extraordinary things!

Keep these examples in mind when reading this statement by one of my teachers, Geshe Sonam Rinchen, which can be found on page 111 of his *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path*:

Many types of misconceptions regarding the self exist, some of which result from speculation about its nature or from adherence to particular philosophical views, but here we are concerned with our instinctive and innate misconception of the self. This focuses on the validly existent self and distorts it in such a way that it is held to be truly or inherently existent. It regards the self not as something merely attributed; but as an independent entity with objective existence. The misconception of the self is operative when the self not only appears to have true existence but we assent to that appearance. The truly existent self - something entirely nonexistent - to which the misconception clings is the object of negation.

This quotation summarizes that view which is the wisdom ascertaining the emptiness of self. This wisdom recognizes the difference between a mere label or attribution or designation and that which is the object of labeling. That is why wisdom is the antidote to ignorance, its opposite. But notice also that Geshe Sonam Rinchen mentions another factor. As he says, "The misconception of the self is operative when the self not only appears to have true existence but we assent to that appearance."

Assenting to incorrect, delusory understandings about things is also required for the delusory process to function. There is a psychological and habitual element at work here. To return to the forest and trees example, that strong certainty and feeling we have that there really is a forest apart from a bunch of trees is a version of the assenting that he mentions, but an even better example is the strong certainty and belief that there really is a difference between the reality of "forest" designated on the aggregated bunch of trees and the reality of "me" designated on the aggregated elements of body and mind. Accepting this distinction is assenting to false appearances which are induced by habitual psychological attitudes.

It is clear that we all use the label "I" and all experience an "I" as an apparent subject of "our" experiences, but the Buddha showed that upon analysis no actual entity of a self can be found that corresponds to that experience of "I" which is wrapped up in common subjective experience. If there were an actual self or person or being that corresponded to the subjective sense of "I," then it should be findable upon analysis of the human being. As all of a human being can be found within the sort system of the five skandha(s), so presumably an actual self should be found there also. Yet, if the form skandha is removed (in an intellectual, analytical way, not literally), is a self to be found? Or if the consciousness skandha is removed, is a self to be found? No matter where one looks within the five skandha(s) no actual self is to be found, only an idea of an "I" which is supposed to be a self or refer to a self.

Moreover, nothing associated with a human being can be found outside of the five skandha(s). Thus, the Buddha taught that the idea of a self arises in dependence upon the five skandha(s) and ceases when they cease, but if they were to be separated (either analytically, as an intellectual exercise, or literally, say at death), no actual self could be found either within one of them or as a remainder left over after the process of separation. Thus, no self actually exists, there is merely a label "I" which refers to a nonexistent self and which is imputed upon or designated upon the five skandha(s).

It is the essence of ignorance to believe that such a self exists at the core of beings and to grasp after such a self; indeed that is why beings are reborn. Moreover, the belief that there is an actual self which can be designated by the label "self" or "I" or the experience "me" is only a special case of the general ignorant habit of believing that there are actual entities of any kind which are the objects of reference for any labels and which bear the characteristics attributed to them by the labels. It is the demonstration of this subtle selflessness of entities or phenomena which is the basic discourse of the great Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna.

At this point it is important to point out that statements above, such as

no self actually exists, there is merely a label "I" which refers to a nonexistent self and which is imputed upon or designated upon the five skandha(s)

do not indicate that there is no self whatsoever. Rather, what is refuted is a permanent, partless, autonomous self existing apart from the act of perceptual labeling. An apparent self does in fact appear to correctly cognizing conscious beings.

A metaphor will assist with understanding this distinction, which must also be placed within the framework of the "two truths" theory. (There will be more about the "two truths" when we come to my commentary on Stanzas 10 and 11 in the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*.) Ultimate truth in a sense does not present a problem: in brief, it is the truth about the actual nature of the world and objects as a Buddha or a Bodhisattva sees it --- that is the emptiness of everything. For this sort of cognition, in fact, no self is ascertained. But at the level of conventional truth an apparent self will in fact appear to a correctly cognizing consciousness.

Let's think about a mirage of a lake appearing on a road in the desert during a hot summer: It is a false lake, but it is a real mirage. Ordinary people look at the mirage-like world and take it to be filled with real selves or entities; this is merely delusional. But Bodhisattvas and Buddhas look at the mirage-like world and see it as mirage-like. Seeing the mirage as a real mirage but false lake is how a Buddha understands the conventional truth of selves or entities, or the truth about a conventional experience. Seeing the mirage-like world as a lake (rather than a mirage) is an erroneous cognition and is being completely deluded about conventional experience, and so is not conventional truth at all. It is merely delusion. Seeing the mirage-like world as a mirage is a correct cognition and is seeing the truth about conventionalities. But seeing the mirage-like world as a mere mirage is also seeing the ultimate nature of the mirage, because such a cognition is empty or devoid of the experience of cognizing permanent, partless, autonomous selves existing apart from the act of perceptual labeling.

This distinction above is articulated with force by Tsongkhapa when he writes about the third principle aspect of the path, as we shall see in a later chapter. Avoiding the the extreme views of permanence and nihilism is essential to the Buddhist middle way. To continue with our metaphor, recognizing that a mirage is devoid of "lakeness" avoids the extreme of permanence, but recognizing that a mirage is an actual mirage avoids the extreme of nihilism. While this may seem like a rather obscure philosophical distinction, it has great significance for someone who is actually investigating the nature of their own experience. For to fall to the extreme of nihilism in one's view is emotionally destructive, as I myself discovered in my own study of Madhyamika, when I had lost sight of this

distinction between false lake and actual mirage.

Rebirth and Liberation

This view that things and selves are not actually what they appear to be also brings about the destruction of ignorance/delusion and so breaks the chain of the twelve links, bringing about the nirvana which the Buddha proclaimed. For, as ultimately all the links arise in dependence on ignorance, and ignorance is primarily the belief in self where there is no actual self, so upon the cessation of this incorrect belief, the whole complex of the twelve links breaks down, rebirth stops, and suffering ceases.

But if there is no actual person, what is reborn in the first place, and what is freed in nirvana? The Buddha's experience in the second watch of his night of enlightenment certified that actions bear fruit in future lives, and that beings would be reborn in one of six realms. How does this connect with his experience in the third watch of the night that beings lack selfhood? The answer is that the skandha of consciousness is a continuum of moments of consciousness, and although this continuum is constantly changing as perception changes and as the various karmic formations mold consciousness, the continuum itself is without beginning or end. Thus the taking of rebirth is simply the connection of a new body with the continuum of changing moments of consciousness which preexisted in connection with an old body. And with the connection to a new body the idea of "I" arises again, and the experiences of the new body are appropriated to that concept "I", which concept is, in fact, without an actual self as a referent, and which itself merely appears to the continuum of moments of consciousness the way any other idea or object would appear.

There is a traditional example to clarify this rather subtle idea of how the sequential moments of consciousness, sometimes called the "mindstream," can persist beyond the death of an individual material body.

In ancient days, before the electric light bulb or the gas light, a main form of indoor lighting was the oil lamp. This consisted of a basin which contained some form of oil, such as olive oil, and a wick which lay against the side of the basin and which was saturated with the oil. The burning wick was the source of light, and for the most part it was the oil in the wick which burned, though once the oil was exhausted, the wick itself would burn up and disappear.

The Buddhist example is to consider the stream of moments of consciousness as like the flame produced over a succession of moments by the burning of the oil and the wick. Now if the oil in a lamp is totally used up, and the wick has burned down to the very last particle and is about to go out, if just at that last moment a new wick on a freshly charged lamp were touched to the old wick, the flame would move to the new lamp just as it was expiring on the old lamp.

So with the process of rebirth. Just as the body dies (the oil and wick are totally consumed) so the flame (light) of consciousness touches and passes to a new body (a newly charged lamp) and continues to burn in dependence upon the basis of the new lamp.

Then, of course, there are some interesting questions. Is the flame on the two lamps the same or is it a different flame? On what basis do we assert that there is a continuity in identity of the flame on the two lamps? Or for that matter, on what basis do we assert that there is a continuity in identity of the flame on any one lamp? If one contemplates these questions one will arrive at some deeper understanding of the Buddhist view of what is and is not reborn over time, what impermanence means, and how much of the presumed "I" or subjective self or consciousness really persists or does not persist over time or is merely "designated" or labeled by our minds.

Mahayana Buddhism: The Emptiness of Persons and Things

It should be apparent by now that Buddhists consider suffering and bondage to be the result of a natural, if faulty, cognitive or perceptual process. Hence, it naturally follows that happiness and liberation are the result of correcting that faulty process. But in order to correct the process, one FIRST must understand and discern the faulty process, and THEN apply the antidotes to it, so it ceases to be faulty. This is the reason Buddhists articulate all the complex cognitive and perceptual processes and factors we will be reading about.

As has been stated before, faulty cognition produces the appearance of autonomous things, while valid cognition produces the appearance of dependent, interconnected things. Tibetan Buddhists take this process a step farther, and assert that in the practice of meditation one can even sharpen one's valid cognitions to the point of directly perceiving that what appear to be objective things in-themselves are merely mental constructions resulting from the interaction of our thoughts and the data offered to the consciousness by the senses. These thoughts are, technically, called generic images or mental images.

The main fault in the cognitive process is the generation of the idea of what is called a "self." We have seen examples of how self is considered a label for the aggregation of the material and mental elements which make up a presumed person. For some schools of Buddhism this is where the critique stops. However, the Tibetans follow the philosophical position of the Indian scholar-saint Nagarjuna who argued that not only do we mentally create a fictional self which is us, but that since the same process is at work in all our experience we also create fictional entities and treat them like selves. By this he does not just mean that other persons are fictional entities, he means everything is fictional, such as trees, rocks and even thoughts. This philosophical point of view is called the "Madhyamika" or "Middle Way" view of reality. It is the "correct view" which Tsongkhapa writes about in his poem.

This notion tends to stump people. For example, how can a rock have a self? Well it does not have a PERSONAL selfhood, but we do perceive it as being unitary, independent and carrying its own characteristics. This is also how we natively or naturally experience ourselves. Yet this experience is incorrect, whether it is an experience of a subjective person or an objective thing. In both cases the same faulty process is at work. The same process which creates delusory experiences of subjective factors also creates delusory experiences of objective factors. Just as the appearance of the "self" of the person is the subjective consequence of this process, so the appearance of the "self" of objects is the objective (in the sense of external) consequence of this process. This is the sense in which objects are

said to have the appearance of selfhood -- they have the appearance of being independent, whole and carrying their own characteristics. Emptying either subject or object of these fictional factors reveals that they are actually dependent, that they are composed of parts and that their characteristics arise out of their construction or representation in the cognitive process. This is what is meant when Buddhists talk about "selflessness" or "emptiness" -- it means that persons and things lack selfhood or are empty of the selfhood and identity we impute to them.

In the section immediately following this one I explore the meaning of "emptiness" in greater depth and then in the section titled "Contemporary Western Counterparts to the Mahayana View" I offer some contemporary Western approaches to the same way of thinking about the cognitive process. I hope it will help you grasp the Buddhist approach.

Subsequent sections in this book will further expand on specific aspects of this doctrine of emptiness.

Why Persons and Things are Devoid of Inherent Existence

Up to now we have been discussing the process of perception and the way it can be transformed through meditation. In explaining this perceptual process the Buddhist epistemologists point out that what we take for a concrete perceived object with the appearance of an existence which is external to the perceiving subject is, in actuality, a mentally constructed image or thought form, whose characteristics depend upon both external factors and subjective factors. Some of these subjective factors are the actual process or mechanism of perception itself, while others are emotions and desires. An additional key subjective factor which affects the construction of perceptual objects is the imputation or designation of concepts upon the object being formed; i.e., the mixing of concepts or generic, mental images with the sense data presented in bare perception. What we take to be an object is, thus, actually a subjective mental representation which arises out of the combining of sense data and ideas, memories, desires and so forth.

Recall that in the doctrine of the twelve links of dependent origination the six sense fields which present the raw sense data to the mind arise in dependence on mind and body, which arise in dependence on consciousness, which arises in dependence on karmic, mental formations, which arise in dependence on ignorance. There are fifty one mental factors which are elaborated by the great philosopher Asanga, which are a systematic description of the linkage between karmic formations and consciousness. What Buddhists call mental factors we would call things like memory, capacity for concentration, joy, etc. As consciousness is always "consciousness of something," so Asanga describes in detail how this "consciousness of something" is molded by habits, conceptions and emotions -- the karmic, mental formations that consciousness arises in dependence upon.

The karmic formations themselves arise in dependence on ignorance, which is defined as a habitual, incorrect knowledge about the status of phenomena. It is this incorrect knowledge which at root is responsible for the of discerning (a mental factor) of objects in the perceptual field in the first place. On the other hand, intelligence (a mental factor) examines the characteristics or value of the objects perceived, and cultivating intelligence about objects and the process of cognition itself can serve as an antidote to ignorance. When ignorance is converted to correct knowledge, fallacious designations/imputations cease and the whole twelve link cycle is cut at its root, so suffering ceases. Samsara becomes nirvana as objects are perceived for what they actually are. It is this ignorance which is Nagarjuna's particular concern in his writings and hence is the concern of all Tibetan Buddhists. Nagarjuna's intention is to provide an antidote to ignorance through the means of a logical discourse which first establishes correct beliefs and later develops intelligence. Based upon these one can develop valid cognitions about the nature of phenomena which in turn will produce a transformation of the

karmic, mental formations and so the entire perceptual process which depends upon them is also transformed. As the creation of objects in the perceptual process is transformed, what had previously appeared as samsara now appears as nirvana.

Nagarjuna's whole position is summed up in two stanzas from his *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness*, which I abridge below:

All phenomena which are the subject of this treatise are similar to nirvana because all phenomena are devoid of inherent existence. What is the reason for this? It is because the inherent existence of all phenomena is not to be found in causes, conditions, aggregations or individualities. Thus all phenomena are devoid of inherent existence and are empty.

To boil this down to its essentials, Nagarjuna is simply making the following basic formulation: All phenomena are devoid or empty of inherent existence. All of his writings are just an elaboration of how specific phenomena which are of particular concern to Buddhists are empty of inherent existence (the Sanskrit term here is *svabhava*, and the Tibetan translation of it is *rang bzhin*).

To understand Nagarjuna's discourse a bit more deeply, it will be useful to begin by examining the three elements of the above summary in turn: phenomena, inherent existence and devoidness/emptiness (they are two ways of saying the same thing).

"Phenomenon" is a term which refers to an object of cognition. A phenomenon can be an external object, or it can be a bare perception, or it can be a conceptual cognition.

"Inherent existence" (*svabhava*, *rang bzhin*) is a term which refers to the pervasion of the phenomenon by a certain ontological status: existence. This concept is best understood by breaking the Sanskrit and Tibetan words into their components: "sva-" and "rang" correspond to "self" or "own" in English, while "-bhava" and "bzhin" correspond to "being" or "existence" in English. The "own-being" or "self-existence" designated by the terms *svabhava* and *rang bzhin* is an *existence* which inheres in something *itself*, a *being* which inheres in something on its *own*. That is to say, this term designates an actual independent existential status which is a characteristic of the phenomenon in and of itself. This existential status should not be something that is imputed to the phenomenon from the subjective side ("from our side," as the Tibetans would say), nor should this existential status depend on any factor

which is not a part of the object itself. Rather, this existence must be a status which inheres in the very nature of the phenomenon: this is what is meant when it is said that this existential status must be independent. "Inherent existence" refers to the very essence of the phenomenon, that which makes it *be*.

Svabhava/rang bzhin has been translated by a number of English equivalents; I have chosen "inherent existence" rather than some other possible terms (such as "true existence" or "self existence" or "intrinsic existence") because it is precisely Nagarjuna's point that existential characteristics are not independent and do not inhere in phenomena but rather are dependent because they are imputed or designated upon phenomena which in and of themselves actually lack those characteristics. This is what is meant by the term "devoid" in the summary statement above. It is a simple negation, which is formulated throughout Nagarjuna's treatises and all later Buddhist philosophy in the following ways: phenomena lack inherent existence, phenomena are devoid of inherent existence, phenomena are empty of inherent existence, phenomena do not have true existence, phenomena are empty, phenomena do not exist inherently or phenomena do not exist as they appear. These all mean the same thing. However, this does not mean that phenomena have no existence whatsoever -- and this has been a common misunderstanding both among some Buddhists and non-Buddhists. If this were the case, that phenomena have no existence whatsoever, then what would serve as the basis for the false imputation of inherent existence? Since existence does not inhere in this objective, external basis, but is imputed to it in the process of cognition, so Nagarjuna says that this basis *does not exist inherently*, or that it *does exist noninherently*, or more simply, that this basis *is empty*. This is the actual status of phenomena in and of themselves. To translate svabhava/rang bzhin as "own-being" or "self-existence" would therefore also require formulating its negation as "non-own-being" or "non-self-existence," which are obscure in English, not to mention clumsy. On the other hand, "non-inherent-existence" is precisely what Nagarjuna means when he states that phenomena are empty of svabhava/rang bzhin. That is, the actual status of phenomena is that they are full of noninherent existence, they actually exist noninherently and they appear to us as being full of our imputations.

How is it possible that existence does not inhere in the objects of perception but is merely projected on them? Recall that typically we do not cognize actual objects in and of themselves, but rather cognize conceptions or representations of objects in consciousness, that is, a mixture of bare perceptions and thoughts and mental images. Thus these representations which we mistakenly take to be objects "out there" are pervaded by concepts and we are habitually unaware of the difference between the bare sense data presented by the sense organs and the concepts which pervade that data. As Nagarjuna points out (Seventy Stanzas: 27) , "Without depending on the defined one cannot establish a definition and without considering the definition one cannot establish the defined." That is to say, although it is possible to intellectually consider sense data and the characteristics we attribute to the sense data as being two different things, in fact we only cognize them in an interdependent fashion.

When we cognize an object it naturally appears to us that it exists, but actually existence is a characteristic which defines an object, just as nonexistence is a characteristic which defines an object. Existence or nonexistence are concepts or characteristics imputed upon bare perceptions in the perceptual process of forming an object.

Indeed, if one considers how one develops the belief that existence is an attribute of an object, that existence inheres in an object, it becomes apparent that one develops such a belief in dependence on that object having a certain aggregation of characteristics. For example, if I listen for the singing of my pet bird and I do not hear any sound, I may say that there is no singing. That is, the singing is nonexistent. I can make such a statement because in the past I heard my bird singing, but in the present it is not singing. The singing has ceased, so it is nonexistent in the present, but it occurred in the past (or "arose" in the past, as Nagarjuna would say), at which time it was existent. Now this example demonstrates how the characteristic of existence is dependent upon other characteristics, such as the arising, enduring and ceasing of a phenomenon over periods of time. A sound must arise in the present for it to exist; "presentness" and "arising" must be characteristics of a sound in order for me to cognize the sound as existing. If these characteristics are lacking, then I cannot cognize a sound as existing, rather I cognize it as nonexistent. In this way existence is a characteristic which is imputed upon a phenomenon if it is arising in the present, but existence is not something which inheres in a phenomenon itself, such as singing, for if the characteristics "present" and "arising" are separated from the phenomenon itself, the phenomenon can no longer be said to exist.

Now, it may seem that this is just an intellectual exercise, for even if one accepts that existence is merely designated upon appearing phenomena, still something does appear in perception. Nagarjuna does not refute this. Indeed, this is precisely his point, and he refers to this mere appearance as the true status of dependent phenomena. The ultimate truth about phenomena is that they are empty of the characteristics we attribute to them, while the conventional truth about phenomena is the fact of their mere appearance as dependent arisings. This is referred to as the doctrine of "The Two truths."

Moreover, existence is not the only characteristic we attribute or impute or designate to phenomena. In the above example of the singing bird our analysis forced us to consider singing as a phenomenon which arises, endures and ceases over the past and present. Even if we are not considering the existential status of a phenomenon, still we typically perceive it as having characteristics such as arising or enduring, or as having shape and color and so forth. We naturally consider that these characteristics inhere in the phenomenon itself, but do they? If enduring were a characteristic that inhered in a phenomenon then it would be independent of anything else, such as the characteristics of arising and ceasing. But we can only know that something endures to the extent that we have the ideas of arising and ceasing, for enduring only has meaning in relation to these two, it depends upon them.

Moreover, a phenomenon can't actually endure unless it has previously arisen. And what phenomenon would cease if it had not arisen? Furthermore, these occur over time. For something to cease in the present it must have arisen in the past. But the past is only the past in dependence on the present. Thus not only the concepts "arising," "enduring" and "ceasing" but also their phenomenal referents are mutually interdependent. Thus they are not independent characteristics which inhere in phenomena.

Or to use the example of shape and color, we seem to cognize a thing as having both shape and color, even if we cognize it barely. But can a phenomenon have shape without color or color without shape? They seem to be different, and the modes of describing one cannot be used for describing another. We cannot use terms such as red or blue to distinguish between rectangles and circles, for any shape can have any color. Such characteristics only are what they are in relation to each other, they are not what they are in relation to the phenomena which they are supposed to characterize. Thus these characteristics cannot be said to exist independently of each other nor, as we have seen from stanza 27 of the *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness*, can they be said to exist independently of the objects they characterize. That is to say, these characteristics are only what they are in dependence on each other and in dependence on the objects they are supposed to characterize.

Do they, then, actually exist? In his treatises Nagarjuna shows, in example after example, these characteristics exist in dependence on each other, they do not inhere in phenomena but are merely imputed upon phenomena in the perceptual process. Yet he also demonstrates that it cannot be said that they totally do not exist, for they do exist, but dependently and noninherently.

This question about the existential status of phenomena and their characteristics is relevant because Nagarjuna is, after all, teaching within the context of the Buddhist tradition. His purpose, like that of all Buddhist teachers, is to show a path for the liberation from suffering. The doctrine of the twelve links of dependent origination shows that the source of suffering is ignorant grasping after phenomena, but what is it we are grasping after? We grasp after phenomena to satisfy desires and obtain happiness or else to avoid suffering. But we do not grasp after phenomena in and of themselves independent of their characteristics. Indeed it is the characteristics of phenomena which we presume will satisfy us. It is, for example, the taste of food and the feeling of a full stomach which is gratifying, not the "stuff" of the food in itself. But, as Nagarjuna demonstrates, these characteristics are imputed on phenomena, they do not inhere in phenomena themselves. Yet they are not independent of phenomena, for there must be a basis upon which the imputation can be made.

Here Nagarjuna shows us the fundamental distortion in the cognitive process which sets the

samsaric cycle of the twelve links in motion and drags beings through the various realms of existence. This fundamental distortion is the tendency to take an extreme view toward phenomena, that is, to overestimate their natures. This extreme view or overestimation is that phenomena are independent, self-sufficient entities which bear their own characteristics independently of the perceiving subject; that is, the view that their characteristics exist in or inhere in them independently of any other subjective or external factors. Due to this extreme view attachment or revulsion for objects is developed and peace is lost. Destroy this extreme view and peace (nirvana) will be gained. As Nagarjuna says (*Seventy Stanzas*: 65):

Understanding the noninherent existence of things means seeing the reality [i.e., emptiness] which eliminates ignorance about the reality of things. This brings about the cessation of ignorantly grasping at an apparently true existence. From that the twelve links of dependent origination cease.

Finally, we should recollect that there are both external phenomena and internal phenomena toward which we can develop extreme views. Indeed, grasping after internal phenomena based on extreme views about the so called "person" produces the greatest amount of suffering, for external objects are only of value to us in relation to that very "us." To crush extreme views about internal phenomena and destroy the grasping after internal phenomena Nagarjuna analyzes the complex of the six sense fields, six sense organs and six consciousnesses, as well as the twelve links in the twelve links of dependent origination. As he shows for each scheme, its elements arise in dependence on each other in an inextricable way. For example, there is no consciousness without an object basis for consciousness, nor vice versa. Since they both arise in dependence on each other, so neither exists inherently. Similarly, no single link in the twelve link scheme arises independently of any other link. Thus all object bases, links and consciousnesses lack inherent existence and only exist in dependence on each other. They are merely transitory phenomena flashing into awareness and immediately disintegrating. Yet they are not mere hallucinations without any basis whatsoever. When this real nature of phenomena is seen, grasping after them will naturally cease.

Key among these internal phenomena are consciousness and cognizing, for these are the basic, fundamental phenomena which we grasp after. When such grasping ceases, cognizing goes on placidly, consciousness remains clear and lucid and all phenomena are seen to be "...similar to nirvana because all phenomena are devoid of inherent existence." (*Seventy Stanzas* 2)

Contemporary Western Counterparts to the Mahayana View

In the Buddhist analysis, the problems in our life are a result of our mistaken conceptions about reality. This misknowledge is called "ignorance" and is considered to be the origin of all the suffering and bondage which follows from our egocentric behavior. Our mistaken conceptions become even more vicious in our lives because of our inability to reason correctly, so the mastery of logic serves as a practical antidote to this. In order to incorporate clear thinking into our daily lives we must completely reform our thinking habits. In the monasteries one's faulty thinking habits and wrong views on reality are corrected through debate, systematic self-reflection and meditation.

The detailed features of the conceptual errors which are to be corrected in this process are far too numerous to be discussed here, but one or two points can serve as illustrations. The fundamental error in most human thinking, according to the Tibetan view, is the firm belief that both the subject and the objects of consciousness are independent, self-sufficient, permanent entities. This primary error, compounded by invalid reasoning, is considered to be the source of all suffering because belief in independent entities leads to belief in an independent self, thus leading us into courses of action which compound egoism, making us indifferent or overreactive to others. Dispelling this fundamental error is one of the principal purposes of analysis and debate and is achieved by discerning the logically impossible conclusions which are derived from a careful examination of our belief in independent, permanent entities.

In Western logic, this technique is called *reductio ad absurdum*: the Tibetans employed it with great skill. Predating Bertrand Russell's *Theory of Logical Types* by a couple of thousand years, Madhyamika Buddhists pointed out that most of us commit what Russell has called "errors of logical typing" in most of our thinking.

Specifically, one of the more egregious errors we commit is the confusion of the name with the thing named (to use the terminology of General Semantics). To use Gregory Bateson's metaphor, we eat the menu card instead of the dinner *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 1972: p. 280). That is, we assume that because our language is full of names for all kinds of objects, these objects necessarily exist in the manner which is suggested by our language. It is not just uneducated people who make this error, but the supposedly educated as well. Bateson (1972: p. 279-308) has written extensively about the way in which behavioral scientists such as psychologists commit such errors, but we see that they were not unique in this. The teachings of the ancient Indian psychologists of the Buddhist Hinayana schools were extensively critiqued in the debates in Tibetan monasteries for making this precise error of confusing the

name with the thing named. Like our own behavioral scientists who propose hypotheses for testing and then -- forgetting the provisional nature of their hypotheses -- treat them as "entities" with some sort of self-sufficient reality, the early Buddhist scholastic psychologists of the Hinayana tradition are critiqued by the Tibetans, who assert that these scholastics confused the psychological terms used in the scriptures with actual, permanent psychic structures which combined to compose a personality. (For example, forgetting that the skandhas - aggregates - are descriptive classes of observed phenomena, and are not entities in themselves.)

While elaborating a variety of mental processes for further examination it seems all too easy to forget that these categories and their names are only convenient handles for discussing our fleeting mental phenomena, and to begin to believe that these categories represent real features or characteristics of our minds. One of the purposes of analysis, as practiced in Tibet, was to discern our regular commission of this error of logical typing. Once a monk came to understand this error, then he could cease committing it and use the names and symbols applied to mental phenomena in a useful way without being further trapped by the vagaries of thinking about thinking.

For example, it is a common assumption that the objects of perception are characterized by shape or form; indeed these serve as a primary means for identifying one object as being different from another object. But one could raise the question, do we assert the existence of forms because there are objects, or do we assert the existence of objects because there are forms? We can't have it both ways, because the assertion of the existence of one is dependent upon proving the existence of the other. Now, clearly both "form" and "object" are categories of description into which we place various phenomena of ordinary perception. The eyes perceive shapes in a field of visual information; our fingers perceive resistance in a field of tactile information. If we see a form but cannot touch it, we may claim that it is a mirage or a hallucination. If, however, we can touch the form which we see, then we conclude that it is an actual object.

Shakespeare has Macbeth wrestle with this problem when he has him hallucinate a dagger in Act II, scene I:

Is this a dagger which I see before me,

The handle toward my hand?

Come, let me clutch thee,

I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.

Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible

To feeling as to sight? or art thou but

A dagger of the mind, a false creation,

Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?

In some cases, where we see things which we cannot immediately touch, we still conclude that actual objects exist, as in the case of seeing things a great distance away from us, because under other circumstances of more proximate location we have had previous experiences of touch associated with those forms.

Thus the notion of "objectness" is constructed out of a convergence of mutually reinforcing data from different senses, which is also, one should point out, verbally reinforced by the similar experiences of others. What we forget due to habitual usage is that the "objectness" associated with the content of our perceptions is built up out of our experiences. Objects and experience are at two different levels of abstraction, and are of different logical types. The notion "object" is actually a category which classifies certain experiences which are placed within that category.

The discontinuity between the levels of abstraction of an experience of raw sense data and an "experience" of an object is nicely illustrated in the following story, which is found in Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification* (1976, p. 21-22), which is the classic Theravada Abhidharma textbook:

It seems that as the Elder [Maha-Tissa] was on his way from Cetiya-pabbata to Anuradhapura for alms, a certain daughter-in-law of a clan, who had quarreled with her husband and had set out early from Anuradhapura all dressed up and tricked out like a celestial nymph to go to her relative's home, saw him on the road, and being low-minded, she laughed a loud laugh. [Wondering] "What is that?", the Elder looked up, and finding in the bones of her teeth the perception of foulness [i.e., ugliness], he reached Arahantship [viz., gained a realization of the Truth]. Hence it was said:

"He saw the bones that were her teeth,

And kept in mind his first perception;

And standing on that very spot;

The Elder became an Arahant."

But her husband who was going after her saw the Elder and asked, "Venerable sir, did you by any chance see a woman?" The Elder told him,

"Whether it was a man or woman

That went by I noticed not;

But only that on this road

There goes a group of bones."

To assume that experience and object exist at the same level of abstraction is to commit a serious error of logical typing, which, as Russell points out, must necessarily lead to a paradox in formal logical discourse. This is precisely the goal of one kind of Buddhist analysis: to discern the paradoxical conclusions which logically follow from a careful examination of the implications of one's views. If a view can be demonstrated to lead to paradoxical conclusions, then it must contain some error.

Within the larger framework of Tibetan Buddhist education, the error in logical typing which leads one to confuse the name (a category) with the thing named (a member of a category) is one of the most serious errors which can be made. This is because the goal of Tibetan religious life is the development of wisdom for the transformation of the personality away from its egocentric tendencies and towards greater altruism (i.e., Bodhisattvahood). This process is essentially psychological, with theoretical monastic studies being directed toward an understanding of the mind and its errors, and practical application being directed toward the actual transformation of the mind into a validly cognizing instrument.

To accomplish this end the teachers of the Buddhist tradition developed a detailed language for describing the mind. However, one of the great pitfalls in its usage is reification, the tendency to assume that the categories used in the description of various mental states are actually entities or substantial features of the mind. This is precisely the error of logical typing which we have been discussing.

What applies to Tibetans also applies to us. It is important to remember that the detailed and complex psychological concepts set forth in Buddhist doctrine are simply tools to assist in achieving a basic human need: finding happiness and satisfaction in life. These tools are worth nothing in themselves if they do not assist in achieving this goal.

My first Buddhist teacher (a Vietnamese Zen monk by the name of Thich Tien-An) told a story which illustrates this point. If, he said, you were to step outside on a dark night and ask a companion "Where is the moon tonight?" and your companion pointed at it, you would first look at his finger and then at the moon. It would not make much sense to never look away from the finger pointing at the moon.

Buddhist Universalism: Interactions with Hinduism, Taoism and the Mahayana Buddhist Envelopment of Asia

In this next section we will be investigating Mahayana Buddhism, its relationships to Hinduism in India and its spread throughout Asia. In the process we will take a view which is rather in contrast to that which is taken by many western scholars, especially those writing in the first half of the 20th century. The view of those scholars is that Mahayana was somehow a later development of Buddhism, that it is more of the "people's religion" than the Hinayana, which somehow is more true to the original teaching of the Buddha both in doctrine and in placing the monkish life at the center of its values. Certainly scholars have demonstrated that the Pali scriptural texts of the Hinayana are older than the Sanskrit scriptural texts of the Indian Mahayana. But this does not demonstrate that the DOCTRINES or TRADITIONS of the Hinayana are older than the Mahayana.

It is beyond the scope of an introductory book such as this to sort out the details of this problem. However, because this is still a common view, and someone holding such a view might assert that the Hinayana Pali material is somehow a more authentic representation of Shakymuni's teaching, while the Mahayana scriptures are fabrications, written many years after the death of the historic Buddha. Mahayanists do not object to the Hinayana exposition, because they assert that their own perspective includes that of the Hinayana, but goes beyond it. Hence, to expand on the Hinayana perspective what I am going to do in the next part of this book, is let the Mahayana tradition speak for itself. For this purpose I have chosen a short text written by a 13th/14th century CE Tibetan saint called Tsongkhapa and included a commentary of my own on the text. While this text originates in Tibet, the view it exposes is very mainstream Mahayana. Understanding this Mahayana view will be essential to understanding the broad spread of Buddhism in Asia. For while it is the case that initially both the Hinayana and the Mahayana traditions spread from India throughout Asia, by the middle of the second millennium CE, Buddhism had disappeared in India, only Hinayana Theravada flourished in Southeast Asia (apart from Vietnam) and the Mahayana flourished in Central and East Asia.

The Dalai Lamas are the inheritors of this lineage founded by the author of our text, Tsongkhapa. I have based my own commentary on teachings by the current Dalai Lama, who is the 14th in the lineage. The text, which we will be reading a bit later in this book, focuses on and is called the *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path*. Note when you come to the text that I have taken these principals out of order in my commentary, beginning with wisdom and proceeding from there to renunciation and altruism. The author of the text begins with renunciation, and then proceeds to altruism and then wisdom.

Over the centuries of its growth and development in India, Mahayana Buddhism both absorbed influences from other religions, such as Hinduism, and in turn influenced other religions. This can be seen very clearly if one looks at the sculptural traditions, and particularly in images of the Buddha.

When reading about Hinduism and Buddhism, one will surely be struck by the varying ideas they have about what is ultimately Real. For example, Hindus assert that the deepest aspect of a person is called the Self, or Atman, and that it is permanent and identical with Brahman, the total Reality of existence. They also say that Atman can be characterized as being of the nature of existence, consciousness and bliss.

Buddhists, on the other hand, assert a doctrine of no-self; in Sanskrit: *anatman* (*an* = no and *atman* = self). This sounds like they refute the Atman idea. But Buddhists say that what they refute is the idea that there is a PERMANENT self; they do not refute the idea that there is an impermanent self nor the idea that there is an impermanent subjective mind which experiences objects. In fact they would say that it is obvious that we have subjective experience and experience ourselves as a self; it is simply that we are confused about their natures and misapprehend them as permanent and somehow solid, when they, along with everything else, are actually impermanent and transitory. Further, they would say that many people would correctly identify the essential character of their subjectivity as being consciousness, and that this impermanent consciousness is actually of the nature of clarity or luminosity and knowledge. This is explicitly stated, for example, in the *The 8,000 Line Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*.

Thus we are forced to the conclusion that the main divergence between Hinduism and Buddhism is over the issue of whether the consciousness which is asserted to be the fundamental aspect of a person is permanent or impermanent. (For a more detailed discussion of the varying views of Buddhists and Hindus on the nature of consciousness see the section Source Consciousness and Mental Images).

Were these the views of the ancient Hindu sages and the Buddha himself, or were they later views which developed over the centuries in which these religions lived side by side? In all honesty, scholars cannot reach a shared conclusion on this point. Interestingly, some scholars resolve this question by asserting that the two streams fused into one single tradition which we label "Hinduism" but which is actually a fusion of Buddhism and the non-Buddhist traditions of India. Whatever their stance on this interpretation of Indian religious history, it is clear to all scholars that over the centuries these religious traditions influenced each other as they tried to sort out what they took to be their divergent truths. For us, the answer to "which is correct about Reality" may not be too important, for

both traditions agreed that one could achieve salvation from the troubles and confusion of the world by taking an inner voyage to one's essential nature, however they described it in all of its characteristics.

One feature which is profoundly different for Hindus and Buddhists, and which is of importance to our survey of Buddhism, however, is their views toward nonHindus and nonBuddhists. Hindus assert that one cannot become a Hindu except through birth into a specific Hindu caste. Buddhists not only reject the notion of caste, but assert that Buddha nature is at the core of all sentient beings, i.e., that Buddha nature is the fundamental subjective consciousness which is of the nature of impermanence, knowledge and luminosity. (Although this issue is addressed when we discuss Ch'an and Zen, it may be of some preliminary interest in this context to note that the initial conversation between the 5th and 6th patriarchs of the Zen stream of Buddhism in China, called Zen in Japan, addressed this point about the Buddha-nature in peoples with differing backgrounds. Apart from the significant religious elements brought out in this dialog it is also of some considerable importance that the patriarchs are asserting the fundamental equality of people in a cultural context where class and racial boundaries were more or less impenetrable.) So it will come as no surprise that Buddhism became a missionary religion. After all, if a person (or an animal) is a potential Buddha, but simply doesn't know it, it makes no difference if that person is from India, China, Persia, or wherever. They still have the capacity to practice the Buddha's teachings and realize their true nature.

It was this Mahayana view of Reality and human potential which had enveloped the whole of Asia by 1,000 C.E. Like human billiard balls, as it were, Buddhist monks century by century traveled to their immediate neighboring countries, and then the countries neighboring those countries, until they had not only reached the shores of China and Korea, but had crossed over to Japan. Similarly all of Southeast Asia came under the influence of these peripatetic monks, including the islands of Southeast Asia which initially received seafaring monks.

In China in particular, however, the missionary monks encountered a highly developed and sophisticated civilization which already had ancient religious and philosophical traditions, such as Taoism. As in India, Buddhism in China grew first along a parallel track with these traditions and then, after several centuries, it also fused with some of those traditions, such as Taoism, and what we call Ch'an in China (Zen in Japan) was the fruit. But fusion did not mean absorption, because Buddhism also maintained its distinctive traditions in lineages and schools such as Pure Land Mahayana Buddhism. Similarly some forms of Taoism were influenced by Buddhism, while others were not. The result was a very heterogeneous religious environment, which we will explore in a later part of this book.

Source Consciousness and Mental Images

Concerns with the nature of the self and the problem of rebirth were not unique to the Buddha and his disciples. Rather, questions about the nature of God and the self and a preoccupation with the notions of rebirth and liberation from the continuity of rebirths (i.e., cyclic existence) occupied the best minds of India in the centuries before and after the time of the Buddha.

Different traditions or schools of philosophy developed around the differing theories which answered these questions in a multiplicity of ways. However, as diverse as these theories were, one feature which was rather characteristic of Indian thought at this time was the notion that the ultimate reality, whether called God, or defined as the ultimate ground of existence, can be experienced, but not described or expressed. This view did not imply that all types of what we would call religious experience are inexpressible, but only that the final or ultimate ground of existence is beyond expression. Indeed, the ancient Indian sages delighted in describing their visions of the various gods and wrote eloquently of their personalities. In regards to this attitude or view about the inexpressibility of the ultimate, the Buddha and his followers were in accord with their contemporaries. Thus, to more fully understand Buddhism and its foundational teachings about consciousness, the person, rebirth and so forth, it is helpful to look at the religious or philosophical context of Buddhism.

Since at least the second half of the first millennium B.C., called the Upanishadic period, the overarching Indian model of the cosmos had been "emanationist" in character, describing a universe of differing levels of subtlety. The *Mundaka Upanishad* says "As the web comes out of the spider and is withdrawn, as plants grow from the soil and hair from the body of man, so springs the universe from the eternal Brahman." The fundamental notion here is that all parts of the universe maintain a direct and unbroken relation with the ground or source, called Brahman (i.e., God). However, some parts of this constantly emanating universe were believed to be more subtle than others, and could only be directly perceived through special training called "yoga". Direct perception of these subtler aspects of the cosmos is what is referred to as "religious experience," and what was originally perceived in this fashion were the gods. But Brahman, 'itself the source of the gods, that which supports and maintains their existence, and from which they emanate, was considered inexpressible. Moreover, as the same Upanishad says (*Mundaka Upanishad* III, i, 7-8): "[Brahman] is self luminous, he is beyond all thought. Subtler than the subtlest is he speech cannot utter him, the senses cannot reach him."

The notion of the inexpressibility of the ultimate was also asserted by the Buddha and his followers, initially in India, and later throughout much of Asia, though they did not formulate what might

be considered a theistic description of the ultimate. The oldest traditions seem to indicate that the enlightenment attained by the Buddha while sitting under the Bodhi tree was an experience of this ultimate or final nature of reality. The scriptures indicate that after his enlightenment, the Buddha first decided that:

This reality [Dharma] that I have reached is profound, hard to see, hard to understand, beyond the sphere of thinking. Verily, if I were to teach the Truth, this Reality, others would not understand and that would be a labor in vain for me. (*Majjhima-Nikaya* I, 167-169)

But with his supreme wisdom he also saw that the many beings of the world were like the many lotuses in a pool, some of which were closed and deep in the water, some near to the surface, some just rising above the surface and opening, and a few fully open to the sunlight. Those buds which were breaking the surface were the ripe minds of the few which could be saved by his teaching, and so he vowed to rescue them.

Thus the task of Buddhism, and most specifically the task of the teacher, was set: Having realized a truth which is inexpressible in its nature, how is it to be taught? Moreover, the task was complicated by the recognition that beings have varying capacities for understanding, and what is useful for one type of mind will not be useful for another. A favored scriptural metaphor for expressing this situation was to describe the Buddha as a physician who had a variety of medicines for healing beings who were suffering from differing afflictions:

In the world, deluded by ignorance, the supreme all-knowing one, the [Buddha], the great physician, appears, full of compassion. As a teacher, skilled in means, he demonstrates the good Dharma. To those most advanced he shows the supreme Buddha-enlightenment. To those of medium wisdom the Leader reveals a medium enlightenment. Another enlightenment again he recommends to those who are afraid of birth and death. (*Saddharmapundarika* V, 60-62)

Of these three levels of teaching, corresponding to the varying capacities of minds, the Madhyamika, or "middle-way" school, set itself the task of leading the most advanced minds to the supreme enlightenment. Its fundamental technique in this task was to join the essentially yogic practice of meditation to an analysis or critique of the ordinary processes of conceptualization which cover and obscure accurate, direct perception of Reality. Meditational expertise was considered necessary so that one could withdraw the attention inward, away from the sensory world, and concentrate on the

ongoing conceptual processes, witnessing their workings. This in itself did not differentiate the Madhyamika school from other Buddhist schools however, nor for that matter from non-Buddhists. What was distinctive about them was their critique and manipulation of the conceptualizations which they observed while meditating.

Indeed, their position in this matter was so unique among the varying sects in India that they were often, mistakenly, labeled nihilists. This resulted from their use of the term "shunyata" as a description for all concepts and perceptions, a term which has been translated into English as "emptiness," "selflessness," "relativity" or "voidness." While casting doubt on the mental fitness of their adversaries for their incapacity to properly understand the teachings of shunyata they supported their own view, arguing that:

"A wrongly understood shunyata can ruin a dull-minded person. It is like an ineptly seized snake or a wrongly executed spell. Thus the [Buddha] once resolved not to teach about the [Truth], thinking that the dull-minded might wrongly understand it." (*Mulamadhyamakakarika* XXIV 11-12)

Or to return to our earlier metaphor, the Madhyamika medicine was a teaching too strong for the weak minds of their critics, whose treatment required a more diluted prescription, one appropriate for dull minds.

The probable source of their opponents' confusion was the "middle-way" school's positing of two kinds of truth rather than one. In simple terms, they maintained that one truth was the way the world appeared to the ordinary person who correctly ascertained sense experiences (i.e., appearance), and the other truth was the way the world really was (i.e., reality), which could only be ascertained by the sage or yogi. (Note that the ordinary person who DOES NOT correctly ascertain sense experiences, that is, see them as dependent arisings labeled during the process of perception, is merely deluded.) The first was called the "Conventional Truth" and the second was called the "Ultimate Truth." The farers on the middle way asserted that the later subsumed the former, but not the other way around, and they called this doctrine, not surprisingly, the doctrine of the "two truths."

Now, such a belief in itself was not actually unique to them. Indeed it seems typical of much of Indian thought, and we can catch a reflection of the emanationist turn of the Indian mind in this doctrine where a conventional world is but a coarser version of another world which is "more" real. But

what was unique to them was the way in which they used the conventional language of the lower level to lead beings to the higher level of Ultimate Truth. They asserted that:

"Without employing conventional expressions, the Ultimate Truth cannot be taught. Without understanding the Ultimate Truth nirvana cannot be attained." (*Mulamadhyamakakarika* XXIV 10)

So the confusion surrounding their discourses arose in part from other schools' adherents not understanding the Madhyamika use of conventional expressions to critique conventional thinking, a technique they used much in the same way that fire fighters might set a backfire to halt a forest fire, or as one might set a thief to catch a thief. In western philosophy, we are familiar with the style, though not the extent, of their dialogue, calling it *reductio ad absurdum*. It was employed quite effectively, both against the systems of their fellow Buddhists and the systems of non-Buddhists. However, what is of interest here is not the logic of their system, but the way in which their arguments were used to lead people toward that Truth which is actually inexpressible.

Returning for a moment to the "emanationist" model which serves as a backdrop for so much of Indian philosophy and religion, we can see how in its new non-theistic cloak the world of conventional experience and understanding has been formulated as a limited expression of an inexpressible source, referred to as the "Ultimate Truth." Now, most Indian cosmologies postulate a continuum of varying levels of subtlety between the ultimate source, which is the most subtle, and the manifestation, which is the most coarse. As the subtlest pole of this continuum was usually considered to be pure and undifferentiated consciousness, the strata between it and the differentiated physical manifestation which is its product were considered to partake of this consciousness in varying degrees.

Remember that the sixth (mental) sense consciousness is aware of thoughts and the perceptions of the five material sense consciousnesses. Taken as "consciousness itself" it is the most subtle type of human consciousness. Consciousness aggregate (skandha) also refers to what we might describe as consciousness in itself as a sort of abstract category. Consciousness arising in relationship with an object of perception, such as visual consciousness, is a coarser type of consciousness because it is influenced by the material object of perception and is mixed with thoughts when perceived by the subtler mental consciousness.

What each of us usually refers to as his or her "mind" is thus a stratum of consciousness

between the cosmic source and the physical manifestation which is perceived by our senses. This is the model underlying the Upanishadic expression "Thou art That" (Skt: *tat tvam asi*), which points to the ultimate identity of the individual and the cosmic source.

Though Buddhists dropped the theistic interpretation of this model, they still maintained its underlying structure, which is apparent in the scheme of the eight dhyanas and in the assertion that "in its essential original nature [consciousness] is transparently luminous" and "without modification or discrimination." Some later Buddhist doctrines are even more explicit formulations of this model, such as the theory of the tathagatagarbha or "matrix of Buddhahood" and the tantric delineation of the stages of death. The goal of meditation, as it was practiced by most Indian religious schools, was to have a personal experience of this luminous original consciousness. As thought forms were considered part of the median stratum of consciousness called "mind," meditative practice sought to observe and suppress them.

The widely held notion was that when the thoughts are observed one becomes more conscious, for that which witnesses the thoughts must be not only different from them but more subtle, since it is conscious of thoughts. Thus it is necessarily closer to, if not identical with, that essential original most subtle stratum of consciousness, which is luminous. It is from this luminous viewpoint that the sage or yogi is able to witness the functioning of the ordinary conventional mind and is able to understand and critique both his own and other's conventional thought forms and conceptualizations. What he tells us is how this ordinary mind looks to him. He knows what we cannot know because he is viewing the phenomena of mind from a higher, subtler and more conscious perspective than we.

Within this context, it is easy to understand why the process of conceptualizing, which is the action of the conventional mind, often came to be spoken of in generally derogatory terms. To the extent that the ordinary person accepts such conventional conceptualizations as true or accurate representations of reality, he is prevented from understanding that there might be other and more accurate ways of knowing reality. Moreover, since the mental function of conceptualizing operates at a median stratum of the spectrum of consciousness, it actually covers the higher luminous consciousness like a veil, shielding it from the lower levels of perceptual consciousness. Thus the very process of conceptualization itself can be understood as a kind of barrier between the ordinary person and higher consciousness. So it was that the yogic elaboration of this emanationist cosmology naturally led to a devaluation of the mind as it is ordinarily conceived. However, one must make a distinction between the differing schools of Buddhism and Hinduism on this point, because although they all devalue this mind, some of them also consider it to have the potential to be useful in the pursuit of the luminous higher consciousness.

The Madhyamika position on the limitations and value of the conceptualizing mind has often not been very well understood, a problem accentuated by the demise of Indian Buddhism early in the second millennium C.E. However, the Tibetans have maintained an unbroken tradition of the study of the Madhyamika texts in their monasteries and they have also maintained the traditions of how these theories are put into practice.

In essence, the Tibetans have adhered to a method prescribed by the Indian Nagarjuna who, in the second century A.D., asserted that "Without employing conventional expression, the Ultimate Truth cannot be taught." That is to say, there is a way in which the ordinary conceptualizing mind can be used to express a truth which cannot actually be formulated by that particular stratum of consciousness which is doing the conceptualizing. This sounds contradictory, but is actually merely paradoxical. Two analogies will help to clarify what the Tibetans say Nagarjuna means and the way in which Tibetans teach this fundamentally inexpressible truth.

In one analogy the conventional terminology of ordinary consciousness is likened to a rope which, like Ariadne's thread, one can follow to an as yet unseen destination, which is the view from higher consciousness." Or to express it a bit differently, the rope can be seen as dangling off of the side of a building. If one wants to get to the roof of the building one climbs up the rope. But after attaining the roof the rope is no longer useful and is abandoned. Of course the roof represents the higher consciousness which knows that Absolute Truth which is of a nonconceptual nature, the rope itself is made of an interlocking mesh of conventional expressions, the disciple is the one who climbs the rope, and the teacher or sage is the one who is not only standing on the roof, but has woven the rope and thrown it over the side.

A second analogy is somewhat more subtle and informative, though its principles are the same. Here one is asked to imagine a magician who comes to a crossroads and sets up a show for the locals. He takes several sticks which are lying about and leaning them up against each other magically converts them into horses and elephants. As a crowd assembles and gazes on in wonder he bids the horses and elephants to do tricks. After the performance is over and the crowd disperses, the magician goes on to another crossroads, leaving the sticks behind him. Here the audience is explained as being like our ordinary consciousness. Because it is deluded by the magic power of the magician, it sees horses and elephants instead of sticks, just as our ordinary consciousness grasps at the mere appearance of phenomena and never penetrates through to their true nature. Thus deluded by appearance, our ordinary consciousness is buffeted this way and that by our desires, and we are more and more firmly bound to the round of samsara.

The sage or master yogi is likened to a villager who passes by the crossroads after the performance is over and the crowd and the magician have gone on their way. Since he has not been a part of this particular magic performance, this villager simply sees several sticks lying around. That is, because he is free of the magician's power he sees phenomena for what they actually are and does not mistake them for anything else. In the Madhyamika context this means that he has, through yogic practice, cultivated direct perception and sees phenomena for what they ultimately are, a mere vacuity devoid of inherent existence (Sanskrit: svabhava; Tibetan: rang bzhin).

More interesting yet is the explanation of the experience of the magician. He is likened to the mind of the practitioner who has set out on the path but has not progressed far on it. He is the disciple who studies the Prajna-paramita sutras and the stanzas of Nagarjuna and his commentators which explain the subtle nature of phenomena, i.e., their being devoid of inherent existence or their vacuity. Here the disciple reasons about the subtle nature of phenomena by using conventional expressions. Though he can attain an intellectual understanding of their emptiness, yet through the force of previously created karmic formations he is unable to directly perceive this emptiness, for such perception requires prior success in the practice of meditation. Thus, in our analogy, the magician sees horses and elephants, though he intellectually knows that actually only sticks exist. That is to say, the magician's eyes are clouded by the power of his own magic, and though he intellectually knows that he himself has created the horses and elephants out of sticks, still he can actually only see horses and elephants because his consciousness is under the power of his own magic.

This magic is analogous to the karmic formations which result from past actions of craving and grasping after phenomena, and these actions have left such powerful impressions on the consciousness (in the form of the firm belief in the actual inherent existence of mental and physical phenomena and the veiling thought forms which express this belief) that one is unable to directly perceive the actual nature of phenomena, which is their mere vacuity. To see this vacuity directly one must first practice an analytic meditation on the themes which one studies in the Madhyamika scriptures. The practitioner thereby dwells on themes which analyze and critique the conventional thought forms which are the mental phenomena resulting from the influence of the karmic formations. In this fashion he eradicates the effects of these past karmic formations and, free of the veiling influence of the thought forms which had been produced by the karmic formations, can begin to directly perceive phenomena for what they actually are. Here he has developed the higher non-conceptual consciousness of the sage, or in our second metaphor, he is like the villager who has passed by the crossroads after the conclusion of the magic show.

It is this process which is of particular interest here, for it explains how conceptual consciousness can lead to non-conceptual consciousness. It also explains why it is that the dGe lugs pa sect, in which my teachers were trained, prescribes the extraordinary intellectual effort of laboring over the Madhyamika sutras (scriptures) and shastras (commentaries) as part of the path to the absolute and non-conceptual truth. Thus the process is worth looking at both within the larger context of the Bodhisattva path and in the somewhat more sharply focused detail of the Tibetan psychological handbooks.

In the larger perspective, the metaphor of the magician at the crossroads is placed within the context of the five Bodhisattva paths. The magician is analogous to the practitioner who has entered the Path of Accumulation. He gains his understanding through hearing, study and analytic meditation to develop a conceptual or generic image of emptiness. Then, entering the Path of Preparation, he utilizes one pointed meditation to progress through four levels, successively removing the generic image at each level. When it is completely eradicated, from his mind and the practitioner perceives emptiness directly, he has entered the Path of Seeing and is called an Arya.

This process can also be understood at a finer resolution of detail by examining what is more specifically a psychology. There is a class of textbooks used in the Tibetan monasteries called "awareness (or mind or consciousness) and knowledge" which categorize all the possible modes of cognition. There are a number of different arrangements presented in these textbooks, each taking a different perspective, to exhaustively categorize all the possible modes of cognition or knowledge. For our purposes the so called "sevenfold division" is most useful. This arrangement is elaborated in a very useful translation by Elizabeth Napper called *Mind in Tibetan Buddhism* which has the advantage of being based on oral instruction by Lati Rinpoche, of Ganden Monastery. Following her translation of terms, consciousness is divided into seven types:

1. direct perceiver
2. inferential cognizer
3. subsequent cognizer
4. correctly assuming consciousness
5. awareness to which the object appears but is not ascertained
6. doubting consciousness
7. wrong consciousness

This is also, more or less, an ordering of the consciousness from most valid to most obscured.

In this schema, a person who is uneducated or who has an incorrect philosophical view has a wrong consciousness (type 7). The student who studies the Madhyamika texts but is not sure whether or not they are correct has a doubting consciousness (type 6). The student who studies the Madhyamika texts but merely accepts the explanations without actually working his or her way through to some intellectual insight as to their truth is utilizing a correctly assuming consciousness of type 4. The student who studies the texts, debates about them, performs an analytical meditation on their themes and attains some intellectual insight will develop a generic image of emptiness (which Napper translates as "meaning generality") -- having done so, he has developed an inferential cognizer, which is a consciousness of type 2. The sage who directly perceives the emptiness of phenomena is utilizing a consciousness of type 1, a direct perceiver. The development of an inferential cognizer (type 2), which is based on reasoning, is the practical goal of studying the Madhyamika commentaries. Obtaining such a consciousness is quite an achievement, and is considered a reliable form of knowledge, as the reasoning on which the generic image is based (which is what is actually articulated in the Madhyamika shastras) is correct, but direct perception is still superior to it. This is because an inferential cognizer takes the generic image as if it were an actual object, and thus is mistaken about the nature of its object (the generic image), though the generic image itself is a valid cognition. In the case of emptiness, for example, the generic image of emptiness is a correct or valid image or description of emptiness, but it is not the actual emptiness of a phenomenon; rather, is it a correct idea of what the emptiness of a phenomenon is like. In this sense, many of the stanzas of Nagarjuna may be considered as verbal generic image of emptiness, and their power to lead the disciple to the actual direct perception of the emptiness of phenomena derives from this. A direct perception of emptiness itself does not utilize such a conceptual intermediary, and so is correct in all aspects. That is why it is a superior mode of consciousness. But in the case of taking emptiness as an object of direct perception, this can only be attained after the development of an inferential cognizer.

The "generic image" is of course the key concept which we need to understand. In essence it is simply a mental or conceptual image, which can be of two types: one is a recollection of what has been perceived before, such as a memory of one's home when one is not in it; the other is a mental construction based on concepts and verbalizations about what has not yet been perceived, such as the image one might have of the south pole if one has not visited it but had read about it. For the student (and the magician of our metaphor), the generic image of emptiness is of the second type: it is a verbally based concept which is developed through reading and studying the Prajna-paramita sutras and the Madhyamika shastras and their commentaries. It is refined through debate with other students, dialogues with the teacher and the practice of analytic meditation.

Analytic meditation is different than one pointed meditation. One pointed meditation is non-discursive -- it is the mind firmly holding on to a single object of attention. Analytic meditation, on the other hand, is a repeated consideration of a conceptual theme over an extended period of time. It is discursive in nature, as its purpose is the development of a firm understanding of the meaning of those thought forms which are under consideration in the analytic meditation.

As the generic image thus developed through this analytic meditation is a verbally based mental image, it is necessarily a conceptualization and a conventionality. That is, it is a product of that median stratum of consciousness which exists between the highest non-conceptual consciousness which is luminous and which operates in certain types of direct perception, and the body or physical matter, which is fundamentally non-luminous, though it is dependent upon the luminous source. Since the generic image is a conceptualization it is necessarily incapable of conveying the Absolute Truth. Yet in the Madhyamika (middle way) tradition it is considered impossible to attain the absolute and non-conceptual truth without it.

This is because Madhyamikas assert that although one can directly perceive (using a sense direct perceiver) the gross nature of a phenomenon through one's senses, which is its ordinary conventional appearance, one must first reason (using an inferential cognizer) about the subtle nature of a phenomenon, which is its emptiness or lack of inherent existence, before one can develop the consciousness which directly perceives (using a yogic direct perceiver) this subtle nature of a phenomenon. Reasoning or inference conjoined with the initial practice of an analytic meditation must be practiced before one-pointed concentration conjoined with a generic image (which later practice yields direct perception). This sequence is necessary because the Madhyamikas assert that meditation cannot be successful unless one knows what to meditate on, and, as we know, the subtle nature of phenomena is not obvious. (This subtle nature of objects is their emptiness, and is the final object of meditation).

Without being able to direct one's one-pointed concentration on this subtle nature of phenomena, one's repeated practice of this type of one-pointed meditation will simply propel one into higher levels of concentration, but will not reveal the truth about the nature of phenomena. These higher levels of concentration are considered a potential trap, for without destroying the conceptual predispositions about the inherent existence of phenomena which stem from the karmic formations, one might simply use one's powers of concentration to attain a merely temporary state of peace. Such a state of peace is temporary because although it persists when one is in a state of one-pointed concentration, when one ceases the practice of concentration and returns attention to the senses and their engagement with the material world, the habitual thoughts and predispositions return to consciousness with their power undiminished, and the practitioner finds himself enmeshed in the same

tangles of the mentally created samsara as before beginning the practice of concentration. Only a joint application of the power of one-pointed concentration and the generic image of emptiness will destroy these predispositions and so finally free the practitioner from the cycle of samsara.

On the other hand, the Madhyamikas assert that if one reifies the generic image of emptiness, which must necessarily be inaccurate when viewed from the perspective of the Absolute Truth, then likewise one is unable to attain the direct non-conceptual perception of the true nature of phenomena, which is their mere vacuity, because one has simply made a "thing" out of emptiness. That is why the disciple first makes a great intellectual effort to generate a generic image, then uses it in an analytic meditation which locates what is to be meditated upon (i.e., the emptiness of phenomena), and finally successively removes the generic image from the mind, leaving only one-pointed concentration on that emptiness of phenomena (i.e., yogic direct perception of phenomena). The generic image has shown the disciple where to look and thus is of critical importance for his gaining his bearings, but ultimately it obscures the view.

When the proficient meditator removes the generic image, he directly perceives the true nature of mental and physical phenomena, which is their emptiness or vacuity. From the subjective perspective, the practitioner is now perceiving directly and non-conceptually by means of that "essential original nature [which is] transparently luminous [and] without modification or discrimination." That is, he has used the reasoning of a mind at the median stratum of consciousness (an inferential cognizer) to develop a generic image, which is also of the median stratum of consciousness, and has then used this generic image to obtain the highest stratum of consciousness, which is non-conceptual and luminous. Speaking from another philosophical angle, we may say that the practitioner has realized his "Buddha nature," which is his own subtler and higher stratum of consciousness. And paradoxically he has been led to this realization through the shastras and the teacher's clever use of the very thought constructions which occupy the median stratum of consciousness and which had initially obscured this highest truth from him.

Speaking metaphorically, the teacher has, in the words of the Hindu saint Sri Ramakrishna, used one thorn to remove another. For just as a person walking in a jungle may step on a thorn, deeply embedding it in the foot, and only be able to remove the thorn by using a second thorn to dig it out, so it is that our deeply embedded misconceptions can only be removed by powerfully applied valid conceptions. It is these valid conceptions which are articulated in great detail in the Buddhist scriptures, and which, paradoxically, have the single purpose of propelling the disciple beyond themselves (and indeed any conceptuality), into the luminous source which is Buddhahood itself.

Introduction to *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path*, Translation of the Text and Commentary

The following chapters are based upon a short text by the Tibetan scholar-saint Tsongkhapa: *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path*, which I have translated below. We will begin our discussion of the text in the next section, with an overview of my comments on it, and then continue with a more detailed analysis of the "wisdom" portion of the text. You will note that my commentary is circular, and begins with the "wisdom" section (called the Correct View of Reality), and then proceeds on to the "renunciation" section (called The Wish for Freedom and Renouncing the Sources of Unhappiness), then the "altruism" section (called The Wish to Achieve Enlightenment for Every Living Being), then briefly comments on the fourteenth stanza on "practice" and finally, returns again to the "wisdom" section. I have followed this sequence because over the years I have found that this order of explanation works well for contemporary westerners. Tsongkhapa wrote the text for Tibetans living about 600 years ago. While the truths of the text are, I believe, unchanged, our minds are different from those of Tibetans of an earlier time. Also note that stanza fourteen, on "practice", while briefly treated here, is the main subject of another book.

There are a number of translations and commentaries on Tsongkhapa's poetic text. It dates from the early fifteenth century, and most contemporary Tibetans base their interpretations of it upon a commentary by the great scholar and meditator Pabongka Rinpoche, who was active in Tibet in the early 20th century. My own translation in this volume follows that tradition and depends on my own lineage of teachers, all which stem from Pabongka. In my commentary, where I reference Pabongka I am referring to a book titled *The Principal Teachings of Buddhism*, 1988. Where I reference Geshe Sonam Rinchen, who is one of my own teachers, I am referring to his book *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path*, 1999. Reference to a commentary is in fact the traditional way Tibetans would study the Buddhist teachings. A personal teacher would meet with a group of students, several texts commenting on a venerable root text would be assembled, the students and teacher would read them all together and then discuss them.

We may be very interested in the teachings of the Buddha, but we almost certainly are not interested in applying Buddhist monastic teachings about renunciation (the first principal aspect of the path) to our own lives. Yet, this does not make the teachings valueless. The monastic perspective has informed most premodern cultures, East and West, and thus is a root perspective from which our own secular culture grew. But to extract value from this perspective and so shed light on our own culture, you need to consider the context in which these teachings occurred in an open minded fashion.

The section on "The Wish for Freedom and Renouncing the Sources of Unhappiness," which addresses the principle of renunciation, will be a challenge to us. Our lives are focused on work, family, career and so forth. None of these things matter to a monk or nun, the sort of people to whom Tsongkhapa addressed his poem. In fact, they would be distractions to a monk or nun, so they come in for abuse here. Is there anything in this monastic sort of teaching which we can use? How could renunciation be relevant to people who live in a consumer-driven society? What does renunciation really mean? Does it mean abandoning material goods or our attachment to material goods? Or altruism -- what does it really mean?

If we consider these two principles with an open mind, we may see that we live in an environment, in fact a world, whose balance has been undermined by the values of self-interest driven consumerist societies. Perhaps we may discern that limiting desires and developing a concern for the common welfare are not irrelevant to our lives after all.

Immediately below I have reproduced the text with the stanzas in the order Tsongkhapa wrote them, and then I discuss the text in subsequent sections of this book.

Translation of *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path*

By Lama Je Tsongkhapa

Homage to the venerable and holy teachers.

[1]

I'll explain as best I can

The essence of the Buddhas' teachings,

Praised by their excellent students,

The gateway for the fortunate who are seeking freedom.

[2]

Listen with a pure mind, fortunate ones
Who are unattached to life's pleasures,
Who strive to make good use of their leisure and fortune
And who trust in the path of the Buddhas.

The First Aspect of the Path: The Wish for Freedom and Renouncing the Sources of
Unhappiness

[3]

Without the wish for freedom there is no way to end
This striving for pleasant results in the ocean of life.
It's also because of their thirst to exist that living beings are fettered,
So first seek the wish for freedom from cyclic existence.

[4]

Leisure and fortune are hard to find; life is fleeting.
Thinking of this constantly stops your clinging to life's pleasures.
Thinking repeatedly how actions and their results never fail,

And of the sufferings of cyclic existence, stops the clinging to future pleasures.

[5]

When you've meditated in these ways and feel not even
A moment's wish for the attractions of cyclic existence,
And when you begin to think both day and night of achieving freedom,
You've developed the wish to leave cyclic existence.

The Second Aspect of the Path: The Wish to Achieve Enlightenment for Every Living Being

[6]

The wish for freedom, though, can never bring
The perfect happiness of Buddhahood
Unless it's accompanied by the altruistic intention.
So the wise arouse the highest intention for enlightenment.

[7]

Beings are swept along on four strong river currents,
Tightly chained by past deeds, hard to unshackle,
Stuffed in a steel cage of grasping at erroneous conceptions of "self,"
They are smothered in pitch black ignorance.

[8]

Endlessly born in cyclic existence,
Continuously tortured by three kinds of sufferings,
Think of your mothers' conditions
And for them arouse this supreme intention.

The Third Aspect of the Path: The Correct View of Reality

[9]

You may master renunciation and the altruistic intention
But unless you have the wisdom that understands reality
You cannot cut the root of cyclic existence.
So make efforts in the means of perceiving dependent origination.

[10]

A person has entered the path that pleases the Buddhas
When he sees that cause and effect are unfailing
And when all objects in cyclic existence
Lose any appearance of substantiality.

[11]

You've yet to comprehend the thought of the Buddha

As long as two ideas seem disparate to you:

The appearance of things as unfailing dependent origination

And emptiness as free of assertions.

[12]

When appearance and emptiness no longer alternate in your experience, but are simultaneous,

Just seeing dependent origination as unfailing

Brings the realization that destroys the seeming substantiality of objects;

Then your analysis of the correct view is complete.

[13]

In addition, when you understand how appearances prevent the extreme of existence

And emptiness prevents the extreme of nonexistence

And you see how emptiness appears as cause and effect

You'll never be confused by extreme views.

Practice

[14]

When you've correctly understood the essential points
Of each of these three principal paths,
Then go into seclusion my child, and make great efforts
To swiftly accomplish your ultimate well being.

The Three Principal Aspects of the Path

His Holiness the Dalai Lama often begins his public talks by finding a place of common understanding among the members of the audience. As he says, all beings want happiness and want to avoid unhappiness. The problem people have, however, is that they do things which bring them unhappiness and do not do the things which will bring them happiness. Much of Buddhism is about discerning why people misunderstand things so completely that they confuse the sources of unhappiness with the sources of happiness. This discernment is called "wisdom," and achieving it is essentially a matter of training and cultivating the mind. The rest of Buddhism is about the practical application of this wisdom in the form of cultivating the techniques for stopping those thoughts, words and activities which produce unhappiness and cultivating the techniques for generating those thoughts, words and activities which produce happiness. Taken all together, these practices are called "the path" because they are like a route from a place of confusion and unhappiness to a place of clarity and happiness.

Just as a road is made up of many elements which have been brought together, such as asphalt, gravel, concrete, street lights, directional signs, etc., so the Buddhist path is made up of interlocking elements which can be identified and practiced independently, but really function interdependently. In the Hinayana tradition this path is described as having eight aspects, and is called the Eightfold Path. From the Mahayana point of view, these eight aspects of the path can be reduced to three principal aspects, which are:

1. The Correct View of Reality
2. The Wish for Freedom and Renouncing the Sources of Unhappiness
3. The Wish to Achieve Enlightenment for Every Living Being

In the commentary and text below we will examine these three topics in sequence and then take a brief look at a group of techniques for following the path from confusion to clarity.

In the text below I have altered the order of the stanzas because I have found it useful in teaching this material to begin discussion with the third aspect of the path, correct view.

The Third Aspect of the Path: The Correct View of Reality

[9]

You may master renunciation and the altruistic intention
But unless you have the wisdom that understands reality
You cannot cut the root of cyclic existence.
So make efforts in the means of perceiving dependent origination.

[10]

A person has entered the path that pleases the Buddhas
When he sees that cause and effect are unfailing
And when all objects in cyclic existence

Lose any appearance of substantiality.

[11]

You've yet to comprehend the thought of the Buddha

As long as two ideas seem disparate to you:

The appearance of things as unfailing dependent origination

And emptiness as free of assertions.

[12]

When appearance and emptiness no longer alternate in your experience, but are simultaneous,

Just seeing dependent origination as unfailing

Brings the realization that destroys the seeming substantiality of objects;

Then your analysis of the correct view is complete.

[13]

In addition, when you understand how appearances prevent the extreme of existence

And emptiness prevents the extreme of nonexistence

And you see how emptiness appears as cause and effect

You'll never be confused by extreme views.

How is it possible for Buddhists to assert that people are fundamentally confused about what is real and what is not real? From one point of view, it could be argued that if Buddhists are correct that unhappiness ultimately results from erroneous notions about what is real, then we could easily conclude that modern people must have some pretty farfetched notions about reality, because happy people are a bit of a rarity! Just look at your fellow students in the morning and you will see my point.

But it is not only Buddhists who have asserted that our unhappiness comes from our unwholesome attitudes of mind. Shakespeare makes the same point in Act 2, Scene 2 of *Hamlet*:

Hamlet: Denmark's a prison.

Rosencrantz: Then is the world one.

Hamlet: A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o' th' worst.

Rosencrantz: We think not so, my lord.

Hamlet: Why, then 'tis none to you, for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison.

Rosencrantz: Why then your ambition makes it one. 'Tis too narrow for your mind.

Hamlet: O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

Guildenstern: Which dreams indeed are ambition, for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.

All Buddhists would agree that thinking makes our prison and that the world is dreamlike (which is not to say that the world is a mere dream). But going a step beyond Shakespeare, Buddhists do more than merely assert that our minds can make a prison of the world or make us kings (and queens) of infinite space. Buddhists first analyze how our minds make the world a prison, then how our minds can make us free, and finally, offer techniques for transforming our minds from prison-makers to freedom-makers.

Buddhists assert that freedom from our mental prisons is basically a matter of ceasing to assent to the belief that the characteristics we attribute to the world are anything more than the projections of our own minds. This is not to say that there is no objective reality, rather it is simply to say that we cover the world with our projected ideas about the world, and do not see it for itself. Like Hamlet, we convert our Denmarks into prisons; we convert the world into our image of what we believe it to be, which is why Buddhists say that we live in a "dreamlike" world.

Though we project many fantasies on the world, the critical projection that creates unhappiness is our naive attribution of wholeness, permanence and autonomy to objects and persons which, upon careful analysis, can easily be recognized to be made of parts, to be impermanent and to be interdependent with other things.

A typical way of explaining what is meant here would be to think about, say, a particular oak tree and ask yourself, where is the object "oak tree?" As soon as you begin to look for an oak tree you discover you can only find leaves, branches, roots and so forth. No oak tree. Ah, you might say, the tree is composed of these parts, and Buddhists would agree. But they then would ask, where is the tree apart from the parts it depends on? There is none. An oak tree is merely its parts and the labels we project on it of "oak" and "tree." Our experience of a particular oak tree depends on these things. Moreover, we see our oak tree isolated in a moment of time, ignoring the various causes and conditions which must remain in place for that tree to exist. We ignore the sunlight, atmosphere and water which nourish the oak and without which it would die, would cease to exist.

So, Buddhists would say in actuality an "oak tree" is a composite experience of causes -- such as an acorn, conditions -- such as water, parts -- such as leaves and branches, and projected labels -- such as the word "tree." Still, when we are taking a walk down a tree-lined street, we spontaneously see an oak tree sort of autonomously standing there. Both of these types of experiences are true and real, each in their own way. But the spontaneous, naive experience ignores essential factors, and this ignorance can prove dangerous. The oak tree may live in front our house, but if we forget that it depends on our

watering it, it will die.

Such an example may seem trivial, but when this sort of analysis is applied to things we have been hypnotized into desiring or believing in, or is applied to ourselves, we begin to understand the difference between appearance and reality, and the power latent in this distinction becomes apparent.

The First Aspect of the Path: The Wish for Freedom and Renouncing the Sources of Unhappiness

[3]

Without the wish for freedom there is no way to end

This striving for pleasant results in the ocean of life.

It's also because of their thirst to exist that living beings are fettered,

So first seek the wish for freedom from cyclic existence.

[4]

Leisure and fortune are hard to find; life is fleeting.

Thinking of this constantly stops your clinging to life's pleasures.

Thinking repeatedly how actions and their results never fail,

And of the sufferings of cyclic existence, stops the clinging to future pleasures.

[5]

When you've meditated in these ways and feel not even
A moment's wish for the attractions of cyclic existence,
And when you begin to think both day and night of achieving freedom,
You've developed the wish to leave cyclic existence.

When we begin to recognize the difference between appearance and reality, we begin to understand how it is that some things that we thought would make us happy actually do not. When the underlying reality of something is actually a cause of unhappiness, while its appearance masks this underlying reality with promises of happiness, it is not hard to imagine the personal consequences. For example, in the short term, a cigarette might seem like just the thing when it is getting a bit hectic around the office, but in the long term we know the consequences of smoking.

Cultivating an ability to discriminate between appearance and reality is a difficult process because it is a matter of slowly changing ingrained habit patterns and freeing ourselves from the cultural conventions which have been imprinted on our minds. And this process is made all the more difficult because we are constantly being bombarded with messages which glamorize appearances and deceive us about underlying realities. For example, advertisements tell us that the right cloths will make us desirable and popular, and many people believe this so firmly that they will shun those who dress unstylishly, making the advertising messages into a sort of vacuous "self-fulfilling prophecy."

Fashion is a good example of a vacuous snare because it is not based on an objective reality, like a natural law, but is merely assented to by those who choose to believe the taste-makers of the industry. Nevertheless, trapped many people are, unless they develop a wish to be free from the dictates of the fashion and advertising industries. Having made such a decision, they are free, because there was nothing objective forcing them to dress one way or another! Freezing weather might dictate that one wears a wool coat rather than shorts, but the width of a necktie is not grounded in anything so objective.

With a discerning mind, we can see through appearances and find the underlying reality. We can see that the value attributed to an object comes from the observer and is not a quality intrinsic to the

object itself. We can use this discernment, or wisdom, to free ourselves from these culturally conditioned values. We can take this kind of discrimination as a meditation practice at almost any moment. We can walk into a department store, for example, and consider that some particular suit in the store might look very attractive to an average working person, but to a wealthy person who only wears designer cloths, it might look very unstylish. This sort of analytic meditation would remind us that attractiveness or unattractiveness arise in the mind of the clothing buyer, they are not objective characteristics of the suit. And if an idea arises in our mind, we can choose to assent to it or not. In either case, and whatever we choose to do, we are conscious about what we are doing and we are not acting out of some unconscious fantasy or social conditioning. In other words, we are acting freely.

While seeing through such fictions can free us from behaviors whose consequences may only be dissatisfaction, Buddhists caution that one should be cautious of falling to the opposite extreme of rejecting every convention. After all, most jobs require us to dress in a certain way, and on top of that a person may have their own aesthetic standards. Freedom from unconscious compulsion does not mean adopting a dreary, ascetic, colorless life. In fact, it means the opposite, and the opposite may mean choosing color over dreary convention in dress!

Seeing the things of the world for what they really are and for what they really can or cannot do is what Buddhists consider the true renunciation of delusive beliefs and desires. The companion of this discernment is embracing the beliefs and desires which are the sources of true happiness and which ultimately lead to freedom. This companion is our next topic, Altruism.

The Second Aspect of the Path: Altruism, or The Wish to Achieve Enlightenment for Every Living Being

[6]

The wish for freedom, though, can never bring

The perfect happiness of Buddhahood

Unless it's accompanied by the altruistic intention.

So the wise arouse the highest intention for enlightenment.

[7]

Beings are swept along on four strong river currents,
Tightly chained by past deeds, hard to unshackle,
Stuffed in a steel cage of grasping at erroneous conceptions of "self,"
They are smothered in pitch black ignorance.

[8]

Endlessly born in cyclic existence,
Continuously tortured by three kinds of sufferings,
Think of your mothers' conditions
And for them arouse this supreme intention.

Buddhists assert that if we are truly motivated by a desire for freedom, we will be encouraged to practice methods for discerning the difference between appearances and realities, and seeing these differences we will naturally renounce those delusive beliefs and desires which lead to unhappiness while simultaneously we will cultivate the sources of happiness.

A central delusive belief which leads to unhappiness is our ingrained notion that we are autonomous, independent of the other people around us. "Rugged individualism" is an almost mythic American value. But contrary to some popular beliefs, Tibetan Buddhists would not go so far as to assert that we are not individuals in any way at all, or that the "ego" is a complete fiction to be eradicated. Rather, the distinction between the appearance and the reality of our sense of selfhood is that in a

conventional sense we do have our own personalities and are responsible for our actions, while at the same time the underlying reality of our situation is that we are all fundamentally interconnected. The very chair you are sitting on as you read these words was fabricated by many people and transported to its current location by many others. You and I are related in this very moment too as you read the words I have written, and so also you are related to people like the Dalai Lama, who have taught me the concepts you are reading about.

When we think about such things, they are obvious, but until we stop to reflect on them, we don't notice them. Until I reminded you that we are related through your reading these words I have written, they probably just appeared to be sort of "sitting" on your computer screen on their own, autonomously. But a small shift in perspective reminds us that these words are the medium for two people to be in relationship through communication. This is a small example of how appearance and reality differ, and how the naive, in-the-moment appearance of things and situations makes them appear autonomous, while the actuality is one of relationship and interdependence.

If we make it a practice to consider this theme during all the moments of our daily life we will find that there is not one moment in which we are completely autonomous. We are surrounded by things produced and maintained by the efforts of others and we are surrounded by people whose attitudes toward us influence us. And if we refute this idea by saying something like, "well I bought that thing with my own money," a Buddhist would ask, "where did that money come from? Didn't it come from someone else or from some company which paid you for something you did or said or thought?"

Tibetan Buddhists say that if you analyze your situation along these lines, distinguishing appearance from reality in your relationships with all the people and things around you, you also gradually will come to see that while it is true that the material things of the world sustain our lives, and hunger or homelessness will make us unhappy, merely having a home or a meal will not make us fundamentally happy, for the source of our deepest, most enduring happiness is actually other people. Whether it is their love, their friendship, their praise for work well done, or their willingness to employ us so we can avoid hunger and homelessness, others are the source of our own happiness.

Such a realization serves as a basis for forming a new attitude toward our physical, biological and social environments, an attitude of altruism. This is nothing more than a recognition of our fundamental interdependence on our world and each other for our own happiness and a willingness to act on that realization that the good of the whole is also the good of the individual member of the whole. The joy that I share with others returns to me as joy, while the hostility I display to others returns

to me as hostility.

In a world where natural resources are finite and population and consumption are growing, the realization that the happiness of the whole is inextricably connected with the happiness of any individual challenges us at every turn. Yet, this challenge can also be the source of new meaning and satisfaction in life and the root of another way of living -- which is our next topic.

Meditation Practice: Vajrayana

[14]

When you've correctly understood the essential points
Of each of these three principal paths,
Then go into seclusion my child, and make great efforts
To swiftly accomplish your ultimate well being.

Buddhists assert that our habits of mind cover reality with conventional appearances, and that many of these habits of mind produce unhappiness rather than happiness. Believing that our individual happiness can be achieved at the cost of the unhappiness of others is one of those habits of mind which covers and obscures the reality that actually our individual happiness is dependent on the welfare of others, on the very welfare of the planet on which we live.

Since these habits of mind are acquired, they can be changed. That is what the Buddhist path is all about. As an old monk once told me, "Buddhism is transforming negative mental states into positive mental states." Hence, over the last two and a half millennia Buddhists have examined their minds very closely and have left us a treasury of information about the mind. They found that we can become aware of many of the functions of our mind we are currently unawares of if we simply pay very close

attention over a sustained period of time. Paying attention in a sustained way is what is commonly called meditation, although the kind of sustained analysis I referred to earlier is also a kind of meditation, called "analytic meditation." As Buddhists investigated the mind they also found that a person could transform negative habits of mind by providing the mind with imagined or visualized models of positive thoughts, words and deeds.

Buddhist meditators assert that if we pay close attention we find that our mind is layered into surface level, easy to discern aspects and deep, difficult to discern aspects. The later could even be called subconscious, simply because we are not yet aware of those difficult to discern aspects, though we can be. Since our habits are rooted in these deeper layers, transforming our habits will require extending our awareness to the subconscious roots of habit as well as retraining our conscious thoughts, words and deeds to reinforce the new, wholesome habits of mind which are to replace the old, unwholesome habits of mind. Buddhists thus say that the practice of the path to freedom is composed of the twin aspects of Wisdom and Artful Behavior (sometimes called "altruism" or "compassion" or "meritorious behavior" or "skillful means", depending on the emphasis one wants to take). Wisdom is the cultivating of new awareness about our mind and our actual interdependent relationship with the whole world and all the beings in it, while Artful Behavior is replacing old habits which produce unhappiness with new habits which produce happiness.

Tibetan Buddhists unite the practice of Wisdom and Artful Behavior in a body of meditations called by several names: the Vajra Path or Vajrayana, the Path of Mantra or Mantrayana, and the Path of Tantra, or Tantrayana. These meditations are cultivated in a set of graduated steps throughout one's lifetime. They employ a variety of techniques to access the deepest levels of mind where not only the roots of the habits of misperception of reality are found, but also the roots of the habitual behaviors which cause unhappiness. One thing all these techniques share is that they are based on the idea that one can imagine oneself as a wise person with completely wholesome attitudes, and using that "template" of imagined perfection, transform one's currently limited condition. All Buddhists believe that the Buddha was at one time an ordinary human being who through personal effort transformed himself into a Buddha. Thus the Buddha can be used as a template for all Buddhist practice, and for Tibetan Buddhists this means engaging in practices of imagining themselves as having the qualities of the Buddha they potentially are. It is sort of like being an actor and knowing just how you want to play a particular role in a movie, and then rehearsing that role to such perfection that you actually become that role. If the role is Buddha, then you practice to become a Buddha, one who sees reality as well as appearance and acts only in ways which produce happiness for himself and for all others.

We will examine the Vajrayana closely in another book. At his point we will return to the third aspect of the path, Wisdom, for a closer look.

Tsongkhapa's Teachings on Wisdom

Let's return to the stanzas on wisdom again.

[9]

You may master renunciation and the altruistic intention
But unless you have the wisdom that understands reality
You cannot cut the root of cyclic existence.
So make efforts in the means of perceiving dependent origination.

[10]

A person has entered the path that pleases the Buddhas
When he sees that cause and effect are unfailing
And when all objects in cyclic existence
Lose any appearance of substantiality.

[11]

You've yet to comprehend the thought of the Buddha
As long as two ideas seem disparate to you:

The appearance of things as unfailing dependent origination
And emptiness as free of assertions.

[12]

When appearance and emptiness no longer alternate in your experience, but are simultaneous,
Just seeing dependent origination as unfailing
Brings the realization that destroys the seeming substantiality of objects;
Then your analysis of the correct view is complete.

[13]

In addition, when you understand how appearances prevent the extreme of existence
And emptiness prevents the extreme of nonexistence
And you see how emptiness appears as cause and effect
You'll never be confused by extreme views.

As previously indicated, this section of the book focuses primarily on the Tibetan Buddhist philosophy of emptiness. Our guides will be Tsongkhapa, specifically stanzas 9 through 13 of his poem on the three principal aspects of the path, and Geshe Sonam Rinchen, who comments on these stanzas in his book *The Three Principle Aspects of the Path*. As we know, Buddhist wisdom is a matter of ascertaining the emptiness of phenomena. Up to now we have begun to learn what this means. The material in this part of the book will focus on some specific elements of the view of emptiness.

Commentary on Stanza 9

In this ninth stanza we have an interesting, and in fact significant, contrast. Tsongkhapa tells us that accumulating merit (i.e., renunciation and altruistic wishes) alone is not sufficient for liberation from cyclic life, that we need to develop the wisdom perceiving reality. This seems consistent with the general psychological orientation of Buddhism. But then he surprises us. He doesn't tell us to make efforts to become wise, he tells us to make efforts to perceive interdependence.

What do interdependence and wisdom have to do with one another? Wisdom is a matter of seeing how phenomena are empty of a real, substantial nature. Interdependence is a way of describing how phenomena originate or are capable of being perceived only in relation to each other. How can something whose essence is that it is empty of substantiality depend on something else, which is also empty? This seems like the great paradox in Buddhism. And if you look through the balance of these stanzas on the correct view, you will see what look like a series of paradoxes!

In fact, the basic Buddhist view is that it is our conventional mental habits that divide the world into paradoxical contradictions, into up and down, hot and cold, and so forth, but that these are not actual characteristics of the world itself. This is not to say, for example, that there is not temperature in the world, obviously water freezes and boils, but that the coldness of ice and the hotness of steam are a subjective evaluation of we observers. The objective actuality is merely water with a greater or lesser amount of energy. For more energy to mean "hot" requires a human with the notion of hot, a notion which only has meaning in relation to cold.

You can perform an experiment to demonstrate the relativity and subjectivity of "hot" and "cold." Heat three buckets of water, one to 90 degrees F, the second to 70 degrees F and the third to 40 degrees F. Put your left hand in bucket one and your right hand in bucket three for a few minutes. Then take both hands out of their respective buckets and place both of them in bucket two at the same time. Your left hand will feel the water in bucket two as cool and at the very same time your right hand will feel the water in bucket two as warm. Which is the temperature of the water in bucket two, warm or cold? This demonstrates the subjectivity of "temperature."

So this is what is meant when Buddhists say that in our experience we must have both something to be labeled and a label, that these depend on each other or are mutually interdependent (just like hot and cold), and that the objective reality is often very different than our label would suggest.

Perhaps this principle seems trivial when applied to water. But how about labels such as "family values" or "democracy?" Do we know what these things mean, or do they have different meanings for different people? We argue about these things, even go to war over them. Do they have objective referents? Democracy is a way of electing government officials. Liberty, in a formal sense, refers to what we are free to do versus what we are constrained from doing. What does this have to do with an election? Yet armies have marched in the name of democracy, when what they actually marched for was probably liberty. Here the label and the objective reality have not matched.

Are there even independent, objective realities associated with the labels we have for many of the things that matter to us in our day-to-day lives, such as "joy," "competence," "success," "wealth" or "love?" Or do we only understand and know these in relationship to other concepts, other labels? Do we know we are successful because we have not failed? If so, what constitutes failure independently of what constitutes success? Could we say that we are wealthy because we own a 3,000 square foot house in Beverly Hills or Atherton? Yet this is nothing which stands independently. A 3,000 square foot house in Oshkosh probably doesn't signify wealth, which means that our definition of wealth depends not on the size of the house, but its location. It doesn't have an objective meaning, it has a dependent nature. The financial value of something, as they say, is only what someone is willing to pay for it. Houses in Beverly Hills are valuable because people want to live there and will pay to live there, not because there is anything objectively valuable about that place. Which means that wealth is a result of subjective factors like desire, not objective factors. Which is not to say, therefore, that there is no such thing as wealth, but rather to say that wealth is subjective, it is not objective!

I am reminded of a conversation attributed to Donald Trump (perhaps not a sage, but no fool either) who, walking out of a restaurant, looked at a homeless man on the sidewalk and then turned to his wife (Marla at that time) and said "That man is wealthier than I am," because at that point Trump owed hundreds of millions to his creditors, while the homeless man was debt-free.

As one of my lamas once told me, no one can come to understand the emptiness of phenomena directly, they must come to understand it by first understanding interdependence. In other words, to understand that hot and cold are interpretations or ways of describing the amount of energy in substances, one must first understand that hot and cold relate to and define each other and that they are labels applied to phenomena displaying qualities of temperature.

And of course temperature is a dependent phenomenon also, as it is merely another way of describing the energy in something. So is energy independent or is it also dependent, is it also empty? Is

there anything which is not empty?

Commentary on Stanzas 10 and 11

Here we seem to have found more of the paradoxes I mentioned in my comments on Stanza 9. It would seem that if "all objects" were to "lose any appearance of substantiality" to a meditator, they would become unreal appearing, perhaps like a mirage. But Tsongkhapa surprises us and asserts the converse, that the meditator will also see "that cause and effect are unfailing." In fact, he says that if the "appearance of things" and "emptiness" seem like disparate ideas then the meditator has not realized the thought of the Buddha.

This is a roundabout way of returning to the two truths. While appearing paradoxical, this teaching about the two truths is critical in Buddhism because it affirms the value of BOTH the world of the transcendent and the world of the immanent, of what is right in front of us.

In the history of religions, we often find that an extreme attraction to the transcendent is accompanied by a rejection of the immanent, material world. Tibetan Buddhists make a strong case for avoiding this view, and they root themselves in the teaching of the two truths. We ourselves, as modern people, tend to be suspicious of those who reject the world of everyday values and concerns. Yet for many people, a craving for the transcendent persists. Western religious traditions tend to force a choice, heaven or the world, God or Mammon, but not both.

The Buddhist position of nondualism considers such choices erroneous, and asserts that both the immanent and the transcendent, the realm of multiplicity and the realm of unity, have value and that the value of one ought not to eclipse the value of the other.

The teaching of the two truths validates both the transcendent and the immanent. One of the things that makes some people uncomfortable about religious life is their belief that seeking the transcendent denies the value of the immanent, that seeking the ultimate denies the conventional/relative. The Buddhist view is the reverse, but its emphasis on discerning the true nature of the conventional (which is different than the deluded view of the conventional) leads to some

unexpected conclusions. In particular, this view leads to the teaching that people should act in ways which benefit the world and the people in it. This is called altruism, as we have discussed earlier. The altruistic way of living is often called "The Bodhisattva Path" after the type of person who lives this way. This type of person is called a bodhisattva, which literally means a being whose nature is made up of awakening, of wisdom. That is, a Bodhisattva is a person who understands the two truths and seeing that on the conventional level all phenomena are interconnected, acts in such a way as to promote the welfare for all beings because s/he understands that the happiness of any person (including the bodhisattva) depends on the happiness of all other persons.

"Designation" in the commentary on stanzas 10 and 11

Tibetans actually assert that there are three major reasons or arguments for why things are dependently originated, are interdependent, are empty of an inherent nature or true nature. Existence through "designation" or "labeling" is only one of the three, and in fact is considered the subtlest reason, and the hardest to grasp.

The easiest reason for understanding interdependence is the argument that all things or phenomena are dependent on the parts that constitute them. For example, our bodies appear as a unity, but in actuality are made up of muscles, bones, blood, etc. And these aspects of ourselves are actually dependent on parts also -- their cells. And the cells depend on molecules, ad infinitum. No phenomenon is without parts, not even space, which is said to be dependent on its directions.

The second reason for dependent origination or emptiness is that all phenomena are effects which are dependent on causes. To think again about our bodies, they are dependent upon the bodies of our parents. Our parents' sperm and ovum had to first exist separately and then in union at some time in the past for our bodies to exist in the present. Or to reverse the perspective, the existence of our bodies depends upon the existence of our parents' bodies --- if either of those bodies had ceased to exist prior to their union, we would not exist now. Thus "cause and effect are unfailing" in the sense that nothing at all can exist without a cause, and if anything exists it must have had a cause, and it is totally dependent on the existence of that cause.

Pabongka unites the arguments for dependence on causes and dependence on parts when he

says that "... they all exist in dependence on their parts, so in a manner of speaking their 'cause and effect can never fail.'" It may seem a stretch to assert this, but one can in fact say that the parts of something in the present are as much its cause in the present as the source of something in the past is the cause of it in the present.

And what is it that leads us to recognize the composite "my body" as a this rather than a mass of muscles and organs? It is the label or designation we apply to it which gives it the instant appearance of being something other than a mere mass of meat and bone. It is also the label we apply to the mass of meat and bone which is the source of our forgetfulness that the existence of our bodies in any present moment is not apart from the causes in the past. To ignore this is to live in a sheer fiction.

But then we do, don't we? Or do we?

Self Cherishing and Self Esteem

Buddhists make a point of the need to see through the illusory appearances of "selfhood" which we project onto all phenomena (i.e., persons and things). It is hard to remember that this refutation of the selfhood of persons is not a statement that there is no personal self at all, but rather a statement that the subjective sense of self or the sense of an "I" who is performing actions, having feelings, thoughts, desires and so forth, is only relatively real because this "I" is impermanent, dependent, and so forth.

This difficult distinction between the relative reality of the "I" and its ultimate unreality has often confused both Asian Buddhists and modern persons, and some of these people have concluded that this teaching means that the ego or "I" is a total illusion and thus is something to be suppressed or gotten rid of.

For modern westerners with this misunderstanding of the Buddhist teaching, an additional problem is the Judeo-Christian tendency to relate altruism and goodness to self-abnegation -- so the misunderstood need to get rid of ego is not only reinforced, but it becomes a moral imperative for these people.

However, the Tibetan Buddhist teaching is quite explicit on this point and quite different: to be altruistic one must have a very strong personality and a strong will; in fact one needs a strong sense of determination, as the Dalai Lama would say.

Commentary on Stanza 12

Pabongka's commentary on Stanza 12 epitomizes what is truly unique about Tibetan Buddhism: one can use the analytic, logical mind to transform one's perceptions and so free oneself from the negative patterns of thought, communication and action which have produced all one's unhappiness, all one's confusion.

We see this point in his commentary, where he says:

At some point you gain an ability to explain these two facts so that they come together, and no longer alternate. That is, you come to realize how both emptiness and interdependence can apply to one and the same object, with no contradiction at all.

You see then that interdependence is infallible, that it is nothing but using a concept to label the collection of parts that serve as the basis to take our label. Just seeing this fact, that interdependence never fails, brings you a realization that completely obviated the way that your tendency to grasp to true existence holds its objects. And then when you think of emptiness, you see interdependence; when you think of interdependence, you see emptiness. This is by the way what certain holy sages have meant when they said, "Once you grasp the secret of interdependence, the meaning of emptiness comes in a flash." [*The Principal Teachings of Buddhism*, p. 129.]

Here is the power of the Tibetan approach to the spiritual transformation of the person. By reasoning about the infallibility of cause and effect one comes to comprehend how one's thinking

patterns are pervaded by erroneous and untested assumptions. These are slowly removed by concerted analysis. Direct perception of what is Real is what remains after the erroneous thoughts and perceptions are removed.

Applying reasoning about cause and effect begins to first generate an understanding about the emptiness of substantiality in phenomena, but later, after one's understanding has become ripe, merely to begin reasoning produces a change in one's actual visual, immediate experience. One sees differently. As Pabongka says, "... when you think of interdependence, you see emptiness" and the converse.

It seems to me that this approach of using the rational mind to produce an experience of the Real, what we might term a "spiritual experience," is unique to Tibetan Buddhism in modern times. But as the Dalai Lama says, this process was taught in the great Indian monastic universities, such as Nalanda, and the Tibetan approach is the lineal descendent of the Indian approach.

Commentary on Stanzas 12 and 13

Stanzas 12 and 13 assert that rational analysis of experience can eventually lead to a transformation of perceptual experience. And a change in perceptual experience will finally lead to a change in habitual patterns of thinking, speaking and acting.

Then in stanza 13 Tsongkhapa goes on to an interesting inversion of outcomes which is very relevant to Buddhists, but may seem a bit esoteric to us. The concern of Buddhism from Shakyamuni Buddha's time right down to the present has been to avoid extreme behaviors, thoughts, etc. This is sort of like the Greek "Golden Mean." The entire argument concerning emptiness up to this point has utilized the extremes of thoughts about the real and the unreal to make its way forward. Finally, thought produces a change in experience, so the further development of an analytic view is unnecessary.

But because the analytic process proceeds through a series of apparent paradoxes which find a middle ground between opposing views (such as things are either solidly real or completely unreal being a standard set of polar alternatives to which Buddhists propose a third alternative which seems paradoxical), one would not be surprised to find that the final position is a view which is another sort of

paradox which resolves another apparent contradiction. In this case, the resolution described in stanza 13 is to show the flip side of how emptiness removes an extreme of attitude toward both appearances (i.e., dependent origination) and independence, while appearance (i.e., understanding dependent origination) removes both a nihilistic interpretation of emptiness (that emptiness is a "nothing") or an absolutist interpretation of emptiness (that emptiness is a "something").

While this may seem to be an overly complex argument to us, or to split hairs, it is actually an important point for Buddhist practitioners.

Commentary on Stanza 14

The point of all the intellectual analysis to achieve an understanding of emptiness is not merely the cultivation of an intellectual understanding of emptiness, though this is valuable, but to change our experience; to develop a direct perception of what is real. Thus, in the end, the Buddhist practitioner must take the time to get away from the distractions of life, even monastic life, and focus entirely on effecting the transformation of their understanding into this new mode of perception and experience. It should be pointed out that when this is accomplished, the practitioner is not expected to remain in seclusion, but is expected to return to the ordinary world of mundane life and be helpful to beings, whether through teaching, through example or through their sheer presence. After all, practitioners are on the Bodhisattva path, which is motivated by altruism.

A future book will be about the Vajrayana practice of meditation which transforms perception and experience, so I will not go into detail about those meditation practices one would engage in while in seclusion. The reader who is interested in such matters may wish to read that volume.

Concluding Comments on Tsongkhapa's *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path*

On page 111 of *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path*, Geshe Sonam Rinchen says: "Many types of misconceptions regarding the self exist, some of which result from speculation about its nature

or from adherence to particular philosophical views, but here we are concerned with our instinctive and innate misconception of the self. This focuses on the validly existent self and distorts it in such a way that it is held to be truly or inherently existent. It regards the self not as something merely attributed; but as an independent entity with objective existence. The misconception of the self is operative when the self not only appears to have true existence but we assent to that appearance. The truly existent self - something entirely nonexistent - to which the misconception clings is the object of negation."

I conclude this section with this quotation because it so artfully summarizes the problematic state which is the typical human condition as well as the solution to that problem. If one were seeking liberation and could grasp in real depth what is being said in this quotation one would need to know little else.

The place to begin a deeper analysis of this passage is to consider how distortion operates both in regards to subject and objects. The term used in the passage to refer to what is distorted is "self," but this does not just mean personal self, but the "thing itSELF" as we might say. "Self" refers to an outcome of the typical perceptual process, where we conjoin our ideas about subjects and objects (these ideas are called mental images or generic images; they are also the "elements" which make up samskara skandha) with the data offered by our senses (the "elements" of samjna skandha) and out of this combination create our experiences. And our experiences are always of discreet "things" in interaction. "Self" thus is a Buddhist technical term which refers to these discrete things. And the Buddhist view is that following the experiential creation of these selves/things, we attribute all sorts of qualities to these selves/things that are not INHERENT in them but ATTRIBUTED to them. Independence and wholeness are typical qualities we INNATELY attribute to these selves/things. But as Buddhists point out, such qualities really cannot be found in the selves/things when they are analyzed very closely. Rather such qualities are found to be our ideas about those selves/things. This is what is meant by DISTORTION and this sort of misconception about self naturally results from the mixing of sense data with thoughts (i.e., mental, generic images). Out of this mixing arises our experience of things as having TRUE EXISTENCE, that is, as actually existing as they appear to us to exist. But this is actually a fiction, things don't actually have the qualities we attribute to them, and this is called the MISCONCEPTION OF SELF.

It is not just that distortion is taking place in our perceptual process, but we also acquiesce to the distortion process. This is a key point, because the Buddhist view is that in the moments after the mixing process takes place we have a choice whether to accept the experience and the meanings associated with it as VALID or not. To use a metaphor here: after having a piece of chocolate cake for desert I might have a desire to have a second piece of cake. At that moment I might just grab the cake or I might reflect on previous experience and if I do I will probably conclude that the second piece will not taste as good as the first. Merely grabbing the cake is acquiescing to my desire without consciously

considering what is happening in the moment of desire. If I stop at that moment when desire arises, instead of acquiescing to the desire, I have an opportunity to be aware of what is happening, and thus can make a decision either to take the cake or not. (This is how stomach aches are avoided!) Every moment of our experience is made up of this process of constructing "things" in our experience and then acquiescing to our ideas about their nature, acquiescing to our ideas that the things TRULY OR INHERENTLY EXIST. This is the full distortion process.

This moment of acquiescence is also the moment where liberation can be achieved, because in any given moment we can become conscious enough not to acquiesce to the ideas we attribute to the objects we create. This is accomplished in the meditation process, where one spends concentrated time focusing on the perceptual/conceptual process and altering it. This is an essential part of the path to liberation from the suffering created by attachment to false mental constructions about what is real, desirable and so forth.

Finally, Geshe Sonam Rinchen goes on in this passage to make an important distinction about what is to be negated on this path to liberation and what is not. As he says, it is the truly existent self which is negated (for it is a sheer fiction, something which never existed at all) rather than every kind of self. The self as a mere label is not negated or rejected because such selves and labels do exist. Think back to the example of the forest and the trees. As a mere label which designates a bunch of trees, forest does exist. But a forest as something TRULY EXISTENT apart from a bunch of trees has never existed at any time. This later type of existence for phenomena is the sort of delusion Buddhists reject. Buddhists do not reject the reality of every form of existence.

This is really a very important point, for some people think that progress on the Buddhist path means becoming "egoless", or "selfless" or that one needs to give up the "things of the world." What Geshe Sonam Rinchen makes clear is that actually what one needs to give up (what is called "the object of negation" since this giving up is done as part of a process of philosophical analysis) is the "truly existent self" (whether the objective thing itself or the subjective thing itself) and not conventionally existent things or selves as mere attributions or labels.

Let me give a radical example to clarify why this is important and why I am focusing on this passage. We might think that the Buddhist path prescribes giving up a concern for our own beauty or the beauty of others. Such a concern about beauty might seem like a venal concern or it might seem like a focus on the superficial or it might seem to arise from a sense of grasping desire. But in fact the main Buddhist concern would focus more on the negative consequences of ATTACHMENT to, say, our own

beauty as something permanent and something which defines our worth. The Buddhist view would be that an appreciation for beauty in the context of recognizing it as something transitory and something which has nothing to do with a definition of personal worth would not in itself be a problem. Not understanding this distinction between what is rejected and what is not rejected leads to all sorts of unwholesome attitudes of world and life rejection --- and this is why I included the entire quote. In fact beauty is an interesting example, because Tibetan Buddhists tend to try to beautify everything, from temples to books, while at the same time maintaining a simplicity about their own lives.

To understand the distinction between what is to be rejected ("The truly existent self - something entirely nonexistent - to which the misconception clings .") and what is not only not to be rejected but what in fact is to be embraced ("the validly existent self" --- that is, a merely transitory aggregation of label and sense data) is the key to understanding how Buddhism is actually life affirming rather than life rejecting while ordinary behavior tends to be life rejecting rather than life affirming. Buddhism affirms what is real and rejects what is false. It affirms love, compassion and altruism as natural responses to what is real, while it rejects hate and selfishness because they are natural responses to what is false.

Taoism: Finding Truth in Nature

When Buddhist monks first reached China in the second century A.D. they found a flourishing state which had an already venerable philosophical tradition. Confucianism dominated the state apparatus, but many other philosophical/religious traditions were common among the landed elite and the common people. Among those many traditions, one in particular had a world view and meditative practice which was very harmonious with Buddhism, a tradition we now call Taoism, after its fundamental "Reality Principle," the Tao.

The Chinese quickly came to believe that the Buddhist path and the Taoist way were harmonious; perhaps some even considered these to be differing formulations of the same truth. Over the centuries they mutually influenced each other, and by the 7th century A.D. began to fuse in some monastic environments. One fusion of these cultural strands is the uniquely East Asian tradition of Buddhism we know of as Zen. (Zen is a Japanese word for the Chinese school called Ch'an. Because of its "currency" in popular contemporary culture, I will use the term Zen rather than Ch'an.) Hence to understand the doctrines, literature and meditative practices of Zen, one must also understand something of the doctrines, literature and meditative practices of Taoism. This will provide an introduction to those elements of Taoism relevant to an understanding of Zen.

The classic, foundational text of Taoism, the *Tao Te Ching*, has captured the western romantic imagination perhaps more successfully than any other classic Asian text. It certainly has been translated more frequently into western languages than any other text.

While this situation may initially seem positive to those who appreciate literature, in fact an alternative perspective is that this may tell us that it may be very difficult to discern what the text "actually" says.

For example, the first part of stanza 4 has been translated the following ways:

The Tao is called the Great Mother:

Empty yet inexhaustible,

It gives birth to infinite worlds.

---Stephen Mitchell (1988; quoted by Novak, p. 147).

Nature contains nothing but natures;

And these natures are nothing over and above Nature.

---Archie Bahm (1958, 1986)

The Tao is an empty vessel;

it is used but never filled.

Oh unfathomable source of ten thousand things!

---Gia-fu Feng & Jane English (1972)

Tao is empty (like a bowl),

It may be used but its capacity is never exhausted.

It is bottomless, perhaps the ancestor of all things.

---Wing-tsit Chan (1963)

We can see that these translations may have a common source, but there are also radical differences between them. Some of the "translators" do not read Chinese, but are best called "editors" because they consulted with other translations in preparing their own. In other cases, differing original manuscripts were used for translation. Finally, there is the issue of how a translator or editor is to interpret the terse Chinese itself.

At any rate, we are presented with a problem, which is that no translation of the *Tao Te Ching* is likely to REALLY convey what the author(s?) had in mind. This is not always the case with texts, but it is

the case here. (As an interesting counter example, Tibetan Buddhist translations of Indian Sanskrit texts are quite accurate. A case in point was a scholar's reconstruction of a lost Sanskrit sutra from a Tibetan translation of about 1,000 years in age. Some years after the Sanskrit translation was published an original Sanskrit version of the sutra was excavated from a Himalayan reliquary. They matched up almost precisely!) Thus we must acknowledge that all that is said about the origins of Taoism must depend on later interpretation and will be biased toward the philosophical and social/cultural premises of the translator.

Stanza 4, which is an extremely important exposition about the nature of the Tao, is a good example of this. Mitchell likens the Tao to a "Great Mother," Bahm talks about "Nature," Feng about an "empty vessel" and Chan about an "empty ... bowl". Each translation brings out special elements. A mother gives birth to something she creates (with the help of a father), while the contents of a bowl originate as something completely external; those contents are in no way produced by the bowl. What does this imply about the nature of Tao, since these are such different metaphors? And what does it say about cultural politics, for Mitchell is not bound by the same cultural perspectives on femininity as the Chinese translators. Bahm, meanwhile, was a Professor of Philosophy at the University of New Mexico, and his own orientation comes from the western philosophical tradition, so perhaps this is why he emphasizes Tao as "Nature." Mother nature?

But, having said all this, we must nevertheless move forward and make an attempt to understand the roots, branches and leaves of Taoism. Because of the book's popular accessibility in many libraries, I will always use the translations by Mitchell which Philip Novak provides in his book, *The World's Wisdom*.

What is this Tao which like a female vessel is the source of all, yet is never either filled nor emptied, no matter how much world it pours forth? Taoists try endlessly to describe it and its connection to our world, yet rarely seem to succeed. Perhaps this is partly because, as stanza 56 says, "Those who know don't talk. Those who talk don't know." Although, of course, paradoxically, Lao Tzu would seem to have thus indicated that he himself didn't know what he was writing about by writing anything at all. Alternately, the statement suggests something we have found in many religions, that the Ultimate Truth of things is beyond words, and beyond mind. We find this in the *Bhagavad Gita*, as well as in the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness (Sanskrit: *sunyata*).

The *Tao Te Ching* tells us why it is that words will never succeed in fully getting at the nature of Tao:

Being and non-being create each other.

Difficult and easy support each other.

Long and short define each other.

High and low depend on each other.

----(from stanza 2, p161)

Words take their meanings not from what they refer to but from each other! Long is not something objective, rather it is a quality projected on something by our minds and takes its meaning only when compared with something else (which is short). In fact this is also a Buddhist view going by the name of "dependent arising."

Compare this to the Buddhist idea of emptiness. Because, for example, long and short define each other, and high and low depend on each other, so none of these attributes can be considered inherent in the nature of the phenomena they are designated on. Hence the phenomena are empty of the qualities of long or short, high or low, etc. We can see here a natural affinity between Buddhist and Taoist thought, which affinity leads to their natural integration in Chinese Buddhist schools such as Ch'an (Zen in Japan).

In Buddhism, this sort of relational dependence is a specific version of the more general principle of dependent origination, of things originating in dependence on each other. Such phenomena are said to be conventionally existent but not ultimately existent. What we will find is that the Chinese see an equivalence between Tao and the Buddhist Ultimate Existence. In early translations of Buddhist scriptures, in fact, Dharma is translated as Tao.

However, Tao becomes reified in later Chinese thought, which of course utterly defeats the Buddhist assertion of an Ultimate Truth beyond all concrete (i.e., reified) phenomena.

If words cannot describe it, how then are we to get at an understanding of Tao? The answer is to accept that since all opposites are contained within Tao the recognition of the interdependence and paradoxical natures of all phenomena is the very recognition of the phenomenal aspect of Tao. Yet, at

the same time, Tao remains as the invisible, intangible substratum of all these paradoxical natures.

Moreover, in this recognition we find the best way to act in this world of ours, for one type of action naturally implies another: the forceful implies the gentle, the hard the soft, etc. Aims which cannot be achieved directly can be achieved indirectly. The stout New Mexican earth which cannot be moved by a shovel can be washed away by the summer monsoon. The opponent who resists you can be moved by facilitating his tripping over his own mistakes. Problems which can not be solved by conventional wisdom may yield to solutions which arise from "thinking outside the box" as we say these days.

So much for the Tao's influence on the world, but what about those concerns of traditional religions: what are my origins, what happens to me after my death, can I know the Ultimate (God?) right now? And, what can I do to know these things. To these questions the <i>Tao Te Ching</i> also provides answers:

The Tao gives birth to all beings,
Nourishes them, maintains them,
Cares for them, comforts them, protects them,
Takes them back into itself,
Creating without possessing,
Acting without expecting,
Guiding without interfering.
That is why love of the Tao
Is in the very nature of things.
---(Novak, stanza 51, p 149)

We might recognize that this is a classic description of the Great Mother Goddess of the ancient world, a description less apparent in other translations. However, what is intended is the same. Tao is our source, our sustenance and that to which we return. Immaterial, it is the source of all that is material.

How would we know it? By what it is not, for it is devoid of anything we can say, know or perceive. How would we experience it?

Empty your mind of all thoughts.

Let your heart be at peace.

Watch the turmoil of beings,

But contemplate their return.

Each separate being in the universe

Returns to the common source.

Returning to the source is serenity.

----(Novak, stanza 16, p 149)

Open yourself to the Tao,

Then trust your natural responses;

And everything will fall into place.

----(Novak, stanza 23, p 151)

Here we have a prescription for a Taoist meditation practice, and we will see its resonance with Zen meditation, which was deeply influenced by this tradition. Passively opening yourself to that which is your source, you will experience it within yourself. Experiencing it, you will know that you are no different than it. If it is inexhaustible, so are you. If it is ceaseless, so are you. If it is peace, so are you.

In the 16th stanza, above, there is also this enigmatic phrase:

Watch the turmoil of beings,

But contemplate their return.

We may think that this simply means the text recommends a sort of disinterested observation of what is going on around one; perhaps the image of a detached yogi in inward contemplation is what we might have in mind. But something else is meant. Because the Tao can be known through its paradoxical expressions in the world (or as the world!), Taoists paid close attention to the processes of the natural world to learn about the Tao. One might even say that they took the natural world as their guru! In this they were certainly different than their contemplative brethren in India -- or the West for that matter -- who viewed the natural world as an illusion (e.g., Vedanta) or as dependent on mental construction (e.g., Madhyamika Buddhism) or even as mind itself (e.g., Cittamatra Buddhism). The sixth stanza is interesting in this respect:

The valley spirit never dies;
It is the woman, primal mother.
Her gateway is the root of heaven and earth,
It is like a veil barely seen.
Use it, it will never fail.
----(Feng translation)

The basic dynamic forces of nature were essentialized by the Taoists as yin or yang in character. Typically the yin force behind the phenomena of the world is characterized as female, yielding, descending, dark; while the yang force is characterized as male, asserting, ascending, light. These, by the way, are not judgments. They are complements, for there is no descending without ascending. In their alternation and relationship the Tao is complete.

Archaically, however, these two forces were described as the south side of a valley, which is dark, hence yin, and the north side of a valley, which is light, hence yang. This image is significant because it brings out the way in which Taoists did not consider the Tao and its dialectic power in the world (Te) in an abstract or even symbolic way, as we might, but in very concrete terms. Taoists looked at natural processes very closely to learn the Truth of existence. Natural processes of course operate within us, and can be contemplated internally, but they are also to be found outside of us, in the phenomenal world. Ideally the inner and outer are harmonic, but in any case contemplation of the natural world was considered an essential element of what we would call spiritual practice.

If one wanted to understand the yin force, living as a hermit on the southern slope of a valley would be instructive. Similarly if one wanted to understand the hidden power of water, contemplation of a waterfall would be recommended. And if one wanted to achieve serenity by understand how things "return to the source" contemplating trees and peaks emerging from the mountain mists and disappearing back into them was recommended.

Mist or fog is a particularly important image because as a symbol for the Tao itself, the source/return of all things, it was a central concern. Remember that "The Tao is an empty vessel" (stanza 4). That is, it pours forth out of itself all things, but in its nature is devoid of form and contains no form or phenomena.

To the early Chinese Buddhists this sounded like their "emptiness" (sunyata). To Taoists the Buddhist "emptiness" sounded like their Tao. As the centuries progressed Taoists, Buddhists and Confucians shared their ideas and practices, and by the T'ang and Sung (Song) dynasties of China we begin to see aspects of each religion making appearances in the others. The great Zen artists of the Sung expressed their understanding of sunyata or the Buddha Nature from which all things emerge by painting trees and waterfalls emerging from the mists of the mountain valleys, and so expressing their understanding of how thoughts and actions emerge from the unformed potentiality of consciousness which is the Buddha nature.

With this brief overview of Taoism as background we now turn our attention to the origins of Zen in China during the early T'ang dynasty.

Taoism and Buddhism Merge as Zen

One of the more enduring fruits of the creative religious life of ancient China is the form of Buddhism known in the west as Zen. The term is actually a Japanese word for a form of Buddhism that arose in 7th and 8th century CE China called Ch'an, and which then spread throughout East Asia.

It is a common misunderstanding among westerners that Zen is and was the dominant form of Buddhism in China and Japan. This is incorrect, for from the perspective of sheer numbers of Buddhists, one would have to say that Pure Land Buddhism was and is the dominant Buddhist tradition in East Asia. The origins of this western misapprehension, and indeed a discussion of Pure Land, are beyond the scope of this book, but I can say that it merely reflects western interests rather than Asian realities.

Zen was often presented by early western students of Zen as being revolutionary, antiestablishment, and paradoxical. One might hear about the "koans" used in meditation, which are irrational statements which one is supposed to be able to comprehend through meditation practice (e.g., What is the sound of one hand clapping?) Or perhaps one might hear about an ancient Zen teacher who responded to a student's question by whacking him on the head with a conveniently located sandal. Or read peculiar stories, such as that of "Ma-tsu and the Tile" (which we will discuss). However, dramatic features aside, Zen is well rooted in Buddhist philosophical and meditation traditions, though also strongly influenced by Taoist philosophical and meditation traditions.

The place to begin the study of Zen is to review what I have previously written about cause vehicles and effect vehicles. The main point is to be found in the statements that "Followers of effect vehicles assert that liberation and Buddhahood can only be effects of these accumulated causes if they are potential in all beings. Thus they assert that liberation and Buddhahood can be achieved through practices which remove the confusion that covers these potentials of liberation and Buddhahood" and "this [Zen] tradition asserts that the potential Buddhahood within each person is covered by the inattentive and thinking mind. Thus, stilling the mind through meditation practices is emphasized because restraining and focusing the mind will reveal the potential Buddha within."

Keep this idea in mind when you read the following story about Hui-neng, the 6th ancestor in the Zen tradition. The Zen tradition tells the story of its origins in China by beginning with Bodhidharma,

a semi-mythical figure who was supposed to have brought this form of Buddhism to China from India, and then goes on to recount the lives of the ancestors who developed it in China. The story of this 7th century ancestor (he died in 713), who was the 6th in this lineage, is informative for understanding the unique way in which the Chinese developed the practical implications of effect vehicle Buddhism, even if they would not have referred to their own tradition by using that language.

This 6th ancestor offers his teachings and recounts the story of his enlightenment in what is often called *The Platform Sutra* or, here in the translation I quote, done by C. Humphreys and Wong Mou-Lam, *The Sutra of Hui-neng*.

Apart from the dramatic elements of the story, which give an appealing sense of China at the time, there are several points which illustrate critical ideas in Zen teachings. It is important when reading the *Sutra of Hui-neng* to remember several things about the document. There is no doubt that it contains the teachings of Hui-neng, but there is also no doubt that it has been filled with the teachings of his successors and polemic elements aimed at other sects of Zen as well. This accounts for some of the uneven narrative and some of the, at times, confusing alternative language for a single underlying concept. Perhaps as significantly, many of the dramatic elements in the Sutra, such as Hui-neng's flight from the monastery, are polemical and related to conflicts between differing schools of Zen, particularly that of the Northern School, which was more gradualist in character than the Southern or Instantaneous School of Hui-neng.

I find it useful to think of all the dramatic events recounted in the *Sutra* as metaphoric or poetic. This enriches the teaching -- and such a mode of reading the *Sutra* not only removes concerns for (irrelevant) historic accuracy, but actually puts one more in the frame of mind intended by Zen, a mind in which metaphor points to truths which cannot be captured in words.

The first key idea emerges when Hui-neng has his initial meeting with the 5th Patriarch:

I then went to pay homage to the Patriarch, and was asked where I came from and what I expected to get from him. I replied, 'I am a commoner from Xin Zhou of Guangdong. I have traveled far to pay you respect and I ask for nothing but Buddhahood.' 'You are a native of Guangdong, a barbarian? How can you expect to be a Buddha?' asked the Patriarch.

This idea here is that the essential thing required for Buddhahood is something we already have within ourselves and something which is beyond all appearances (such as race -- which, by the way, was a pretty radical idea in an extremely hierarchical society such as ancient China).

I replied, 'Although there are northern men and southern men, north and south make no difference to their Buddha-nature. A barbarian is different from Your Holiness physically, but there is no difference in our Buddha-nature.'

A number of modern commentators have pointed out that this sort of statement demonstrates the fallacy that Hui-neng was uneducated when he first came to the monastery. Heinrich Dumoulin makes this sort of assertion on page 89 of his *A History of Zen Buddhism*, 1963. The Chinese would read something else in the statement -- namely, that Hui-neng's natural wisdom has revealed this truth to him even before his encounter with the 5th Ancestor. As modern people we may feel compelled to choose the former explanation over the later, or perhaps, if we are followers of Zen, the later over the former. Why can't both be true?

He was going to speak further to me, but the presence of other disciples made him stop short. He then ordered me to join the crowd to work.

The point here is that the realization of Buddha nature is what it is that makes for enlightenment, or as Hui-neng himself says in opening the story "... our Essence of Mind (literally, self-nature [or Buddha mind]) which is the seed or kernel of enlightenment (Bodhi) is pure by nature, and by making use of this mind alone we can reach Buddhahood directly."

During their final meeting, after the "poetry contest" which will be recounted below, the 5th Patriarch transmits the Dharma succession to Hui-neng, who is now to be the 6th Patriarch. In the *Sutra* Hui-neng recounts part of that meeting, saying,

Knowing that I had realized the Essence of Mind, the Patriarch said, "For him who does not know his own mind there is no use learning Buddhism. On the other hand, if he knows his own mind and sees intuitively his own nature, he is a Hero, a 'Teacher of gods and men', 'Buddha'.

"Realizing the essence of mind" or "seeing directly into one's own nature" became the hallmark of practice in the southern school of Ch'an, of which the 6th Patriarch is the exemplar and source of authenticity.

This might seem to contradict the teaching on emptiness we find in the stages on the path to enlightenment doctrine in Tibet, which is a version of the causal vehicle of the gradual path of accumulating merit and wisdom. In fact this is not the case. In the gradual path teaching, all things are asserted to be empty of the characteristics we impute upon them. Usually when we think of things, we think of things as being the objects of experience. But the teachings on dependent arising clearly state that object depends on subject, as does subject depend on object, and the subject of our experience is our own mind or consciousness. If all things are empty, this means that not only are all objective things empty, but so are all subjective things. In other words, the mind in its very nature is empty of everything we think about it or believe we know about it. To realize this emptiness of the mind itself is to see directly into one's own actual nature, which is of course empty. This direct experience of seeing one's mind itself to be empty is wisdom in itself, and is the very condition which Hui-neng asserts will deliver one -- because once the subject is realized as empty then all that it relates to, that is, all objects, are also realized as empty. If subject and object arise in dependence on each other, then if one is empty, so is the other.

So the Zen point is to realize this essence of mind, or Buddha mind, and depend on it for one's realization. Nothing else will bring about one's liberation and enlightenment, according to this point of view. In fact all other activity is ultimately a waste of time (like trying to turn a tile into a mirror by polishing it). This is brought out in the comparison of stanzas from the "poetry contest", which is the dramatic apex of the story, to which we now return.

The Patriarch one day assembled all his disciples and said to them, "The question of incessant rebirth is a momentous one. Day after day, instead of trying to free yourselves from this bitter sea of life and death, you seem to go after tainted merits only (i.e. merits which will cause rebirth). Yet merits will be of no help, if your Essence of Mind is obscured. Go and seek for Prajna (wisdom) in your own mind and then write me a stanza (gatha) about it. He who understands what the Essence of Mind is will be given the robe (the insignia of the Patriarchate) and the Dharma (i.e. the esoteric teaching of the Dhyana school), and I shall make him the Sixth Patriarch. Go away quickly. Delay not in writing the stanza, as deliberation is quite unnecessary and of no use. The man who has realized the Essence of Mind can speak of it at once, as soon as he is spoken to about it; and he cannot lose sight of it, even when engaged in battle.

The head student, Shen Xiu [= Shen-hsiu], wrote this stanza on one of the monastery's walls:

Our body is the Bodhi-tree,
And our mind a mirror bright.
Carefully we wipe them hour by hour,
And let no dust alight.

At midnight, the Patriarch sent for Shen Xiu to come to the hall, and asked him whether the stanza was written by him or not. "It was, Sir," replied Shen Xiu. "I dare not be so vain as to expect to get the Patriarchate, but I wish Your Holiness would kindly tell me whether my stanza shows the least grain of wisdom."

"Your stanza," replied the Patriarch, "shows that you have not yet realized the Essence of Mind. So far you have reached the 'door of enlightenment', but you have not yet entered it. To seek for supreme enlightenment with such an understanding as yours can hardly be successful."

After several days Hui-neng saw Shen Xiu's stanza and had it read to him by a fellow monk. Then Hui-neng asked the monk to write this stanza of his own composition on the wall:

There is no Bodhi-tree,
Nor stand of a mirror bright.
Since all is void,
Where can the dust alight?

In other words, since the essence of mind, or Buddha mind, is pure from the beginning (because in its nature it is empty of inherent existence) and since we already have it, so ultimately it cannot be obscured by worldly life. Worldly life is the "dust" in Chinese symbolism, so this is why Hui-neng says

that there is fundamentally no dust (the obscurations which are the habits or karma accumulated in worldly life) to cover it and fundamentally nothing to do but allow it to shine forth. This poetic interpretation will make more sense if we remember the Mahayana teaching about the Two Truths. Anything in its ultimate nature is empty, and thus pure and unstained, while in its relative/conventional nature, it is a mere appearance, which may in fact be stained and impure. Both conditions are true at the same moment, but the former condition appears to the enlightened mind, while the later condition appears to the ordinary mind. Hui-neng argues that by relying on the enlightened mind we find all things to be pure, unobscured and "dustless."

This attitude is then expanded upon in the rest of Zen history, and reaches its pithiest form in the teachings of the founder of the Japanese Soto Zen school, Dogen, who boiled down all of Zen practice to simply sitting (called zazen). Dogen elaborates on this view in an essay which can be found in Philip Novak's compilation of scriptures *The World's Wisdom* on page 100, "The Merit Lies in Sitting."

Unfortunately, for an unripe mind, such an attitude can also lead to a lot of nonsense, such as the idea that there is nothing to do because one is already a Buddha. Effect vehicle teachings are very specific about this: there is a difference between a potential Buddha and a Buddha! Even Hui-neng was not enlightened when he composed his stanza, which is revealed when, after reading Hui-neng's stanza, the master visits him in the kitchen and inquires "Is the rice ready?" "Ready long ago," Hui-neng replies. That is to say, Hui-neng is asked if his mind is ripe for the final step into enlightenment, which he later receives through the 5th Patriarch's teaching that evening.

Moreover, the 5th Patriarch's wisdom of these distinctions is revealed in his response to his first reading of Shen Xiu's stanza of limited understanding written on the wall:

In the morning, he sent for Mr. Lu, the court artist, and went with him to the south corridor to have the walls there painted with pictures. By chance, he saw the stanza. "I am sorry to have troubled you to come so far," he said to the artist. "The walls need not be painted now, as the Sutra says, 'All forms or phenomena are transient and illusive.' It will be better to leave the stanza here, so that people may study it and recite it. If they put its teaching into actual practice, they will be saved from the misery of being born in these evil realms of existence (gatis). The merit gained by one who practices it will be great indeed!

In other words, while the 5th Patriarch understands that while the meditation practice of removing obscurations from the mind does not in itself produce enlightenment or Buddha mind, still it has the important benefit of saving practitioners from the misery produced by their own obscurations. This is the point overlooked by modern (or ancient) people who assert, misreading the Zen teachings, that one merely needs to be spontaneous and natural in one's life to be free and enlightened. Another way of reading why the master removed Hui-neng's stanza from the wall is that he knew the dangers which lurk in superficial understandings of effect vehicle teachings.

Consider the painting attributed to Liang K'ai (early 13th century China) called *6th Patriarch Tearing Up a Sutra*. One might take this literally, in the superficial sense of believing that Zen teaches that the sutras are irrelevant to achieving Enlightenment and may be disposed of. But the *Sutra of Hui-neng* is full of respectful references to sutras, so this cannot be the case. Rather, the patriarch teaches that seeing into the essence of mind is necessary for the achievement of enlightenment. Merely reciting sutras will not bring about enlightenment. Nor will mere study which is not put into practice. But this is not to say that sutras are irrelevant. One must understand both the deep capacity of metaphors, as well as their limits. To tear up a sutra is to say, "do not depend on words, depend on the essence of mind." It is not to say, "the sutra is irrelevant," which might be the literal interpretation.

My first Zen teacher told this story. If you and a friend were to step outside one night, and you were to ask your friend, "Where is the moon?", your friend might point to it. Looking first at your friend's pointing finger, you would then look at the moon. Wouldn't it be foolish to look at the finger and forget to look at the moon? But without looking at the finger, how would you find the moon? So with the sutras and the Dharma teachings in general. Without the teachings about mind and emptiness, how would someone know where to look? But if one does not look beyond the formal teachings to the actual experience, how will one gain enlightenment?

Of course, you might ask, "Why does someone need to point out the moon. I can just see it." Hui-neng might ask you the same question. "Why can't you just see the essence of mind?"

The Southern School of Zen, which descended from Hui-neng, exerted a profound influence on the culture of China, and hence all of East Asia, in the centuries to follow. Artists such as Liang K'ai practiced a "spontaneous" and energetic style of painting which served as a counterpoint to the formalism of the court artists trained in the academies. Equally importantly, the words and deeds of the great masters of the period were recorded and studied by generations of Zen monks, nuns and lay people.

Just as the painters perfected their craft so they could paint "spontaneously" and with a direct and energetic freshness, so the meditation masters taught their disciples in unconventional, metaphoric and direct ways. The story of Ma-tsu and the tile is such an example. Ma-tsu (707-786) became the dominant figure in the third generation after Hui-neng.

You should read it and consider it in the light of the answer Hui-neng gave the 5th Patriarch at the time of their initial meeting.

Ma-tsu was then residing in the monastery continuously absorbed in meditation. His Master, aware of his outstanding ability for the Dharma, asked him "For what purpose are you sitting in meditation?" Ma-tsu answered, "I wish to become a Buddha." Thereupon the Master picked up a tile and started rubbing it on a stone. Ma-tsu asked, "What are you doing Master?" "I am polishing this tile to make a mirror," Hui-jang replied. "How can you make a mirror by rubbing a tile?" exclaimed Ma-tsu? "How can one become a Buddha by sitting in meditation?" countered the Master. (Taken from Dumoulin, p. 98.)

The idea is that Buddhahood cannot be created out of something other than Buddha nature. Hence, to use an analogy, polishing a tile cannot make a mirror. By this analogy, the Zen school is asserting that you cannot MAKE enlightenment or Buddhahood by accumulating its causes (polishing = meditation practice, accumulating merit, etc.); you can only reveal what is already there.

To further expand on the dimensionality of the metaphor, consider that the mirror was the favored image for the Buddha-mind, which contains and perfectly reflects in luminous and insubstantial form all appearances, whether moving or unmoving, while in itself the mirror is unaffected by anything it reflects.

In fact, after his death Hui-neng was given the title "Zen Master of the Great Mirror."