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Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Path to Buddhahood

I. Awakening Enlightenment Consciousness (*bodhicitta*)

Buddhism offers multiple goals of practice commensurate with the actual capacity of various practitioners. The first and most obvious goal of Buddhist practice is mundane. Thereafter, a supramundane goal is also indicated. Nāgārjuna has said that when the Dharma is properly practiced, it leads first to happiness and prosperity, and then to freedom.¹ Happiness and prosperity is the immediate mundane goal of Buddhist practice, while freedom is the eventual supramundane goal of it. But even freedom is of two types: negative and positive. That is to say, freedom may be mere disengagement from the suffering of the world, or it may be disengagement from the suffering of the world accompanied by voluntary reengagement in the suffering of the world for the sake of other sentient beings. This attitude of contemporaneous disengagement and reengagement presupposes the accomplishment of Buddhahood. Buddhahood is the highest goal offered by Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhism retains that this goal is attainable by all. Accordingly, it teaches a path for attaining Buddhahood for which the Buddha himself is the supreme paradigm.

The Mahāyāna path to Buddhahood presupposes a number of extensive preliminary practices which are common to the Buddhist tradition as a whole. I do not intend to treat them in detail, and I mention them here only to preclude the possibility that anyone may suppose them to be dispensable. The preliminary practices include the awakening of faith (in the possibility of self-development) and the taking of refuge, the contemplation of the eighteen opportune conditions,² death and impermanence and the contemplation of suffering and the law of *karma*. Only when these preliminaries have been well and truly accomplished does the Mahāyāna path *per se* commence.

The accomplishment of the preliminaries has to be seen in the context of the eradication of the three afflictions which is necessary in order to attain Enlightenment. As it is well known, attachment (*rāga*), aversion (*dveṣa*) and ignorance (*avidyā*) are the three principal afflictions. The preliminary practices serve to eradicate attachment through the development of detachment or more positively renunciation. When they are completed, the practitioner ought to be ready to renounce the whole of cyclical existence without the least hesitation or regret.³ This is why the Bodhisattva was able to give up kingdom without any hesitation. Śāntideva said that when the sufferings of *saṃsāra* is fully recognized then real renunciation is awakened, and at that point one can give up even kingdom as easily as one would expel spittle from the mouth. Once the affliction of attachment has been eradicated, the affliction of aversion has to be similarly eliminated, and this is the task of love and compassion – two major and indispensable elements in the awakening of Enlightenment Consciousness (*bodhicitta*). Finally, the affliction of ignorance is eradicated through the development of wisdom which constitutes the highest achievement in the career of the Bodhisattva in the course of his progress towards Buddhahood.

The cultivation of renunciation therefore constitutes the essence of the Theravāda or Hīnayāna which I would prefer to call fundamental Buddhism. It also constitutes an indispensable prerequisite to embarking upon the Mahāyāna path proper. The cultivation of love and compassion is the essence of the Mahāyāna, and the cultivation of wisdom is necessary in differing degrees to both vehicles. This threefold soteriological process of self development may be seen reflected also in the Buddha's injunction, "to avoid evil, to do good and to purify the mind."⁴ The essential ethical attitudes of the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna as embodied in the code of precepts conducive to individual liberation (*pratimokṣa*) and in the vows of the Bodhisattva may equally be seen in the first two parts of the citation quoted above and in the cultivation of renunciation and love and compassion just described. It need hardly be noted that these soteriological and ethical prescriptions also reflect the basic attitudes of disengagement and reengagement mentioned above.

The beginning, middle and end of the Mahāyāna path is Enlightenment Consciousness. The Mahāyāna path begins with the awakening of Enlightenment Consciousness, is sustained by the cultivation of the two aspect of conventional Enlightenment Consciousness⁵ and achieves its objective with the attainment of ultimate Enlightenment Consciousness. This process of awakening and developing Enlightenment Consciousness is also conterminous with the progress of the Bodhisattva the central figure in the Mahāyāna drama of liberation towards Buddhahood. Indeed, as we see in the account of Śākyamuni's own progress towards Buddhahood, it is with the awakening of Enlightenment Consciousness that an ordinary sentient being becomes a Bodhisattva, that is one who is directed towards the attainment of ultimate, supreme and perfect Enlightenment for the sake of all sentient being. According to the Jātaka, once upon a time, there was a merchant who was the only guardian and support of his old and blind mother. It so happened that this merchant was constrained to travel abroad on business, and having no one with whom he could leave his dependent mother, he was compelled to bring her along with him. In the course of their journey to a distant land, the ship in which they were travelling was struck by a storm and foundered. The merchant found himself cast into the sea, where with the aid of a piece of timber torn loose from the wreck of the ship, he managed to locate and rescue his mother. It was then according to the tale that he conceived the idea of accomplishing the ultimate happiness and freedom from suffering of all sentient beings.⁶ This was the awakening of Enlightenment Consciousness and the beginning of the career of the Bodhisattva who was to become Śākyamuni, the historical Buddha. The Jātaka story implies that in Śākyamuni's case, the awakening of Enlightenment Consciousness was spontaneous, but the Mahāyāna has supplied a systematic procedure for imitating the career of Śākyamuni and awakening Enlightenment Consciousness for oneself. The deliberate cultivation of the attitude of love (*maitrī*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) towards all sentient beings conducts one to the awakening of Enlightenment Consciousness.

Love is the sincere wish that all sentient beings be happy and that they may possess the causes of happiness that is wholesome actions. Compassion is the sincere wish that all sentient beings be free from suffering and from the causes of suffering that is unwholesome

actions. The foregoing definition makes it abundantly clear that love and compassion compliment one another.

The *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* attributed to Maitreya-nātha says of the Bodhisattva's practice of love, "Just as parents love their only child, so Bodhisattvas who greatly love sentient beings from the bottom of their hearts always desire to benefit them."⁷ The *Samādhirāja Sūtra* extols the practice of love in the following words, "The amount and portion of merit gained from offering inconceivable gifts that would fill a trillion Buddha-fields each day to the excellent beings is not equal to that of the thought of love."⁸ Love is accompanied by compassion in the practice leading to the awakening of Enlightenment Consciousness, as it is said in the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, "The water of compassion flows through the channel of love."⁹

Compassion is the very essence of the Mahāyāna. In the *Dharmasaṃgīti Sūtra*, Avalokiteśvara declares, "...one who desires to gain Buddhahood does not need to be disciplined in many teachings but should be disciplined in one teaching....It is great compassion.wherever the great compassion of the Bodhisattva exists; there exists all the teachings of the Buddha."¹⁰ Therefore love and compassion are greatly praised in the Mahāyāna and between them lead to the awakening of Enlightenment Consciousness.

The basis of the attitudes of love and compassion is the recognition of the essential equality of all sentient beings. Śāntideva declares, "In the beginning one should diligently meditate upon the equality of self and other. In as much as oneself and others are alike in wanting happiness and not wanting pain, one should protect everyone as oneself."¹¹ Again, "When both myself and others are alike in not wanting pain and fear, what distinguishes my ownself in that I protect it and not others."¹²

Not only is there no basis of distinction which might justify self interest at the cost of the interests of others, but on the contrary, the fulfillment of the interests of others fulfills one's own highest good as well. While serving one's own ends only causes suffering, serving the

ends of others brings about the happiness of both oneself and others. Indeed, Śāntideva explains that all the unhappiness in the world originates from favoring oneself. The only way to achieve happiness is to abandon self-centeredness.¹³ Moreover, the qualities of Buddhahood are attained from serving other sentient beings just as they are attained from serving the Buddhas.¹⁴

The solidarity which one is encouraged to feel with other sentient beings is not simply the effect of equivalent likes and dislikes. It is also the effect of a debt. It is, one might say, a reciprocal responsibility. This follows from the fact that, according to the Buddhist view, all sentient beings have been reborn innumerable times. In the course of these innumerable rebirths, all sentient beings have been one's own mother or father, not once but many times. Nāgārjuna says, citing a canonical source, that each of us in the course of our many previous lives has drunk more mothers' milk than water in the four oceans.¹⁵ Therefore, although we may not recognize them, because of the profound changes brought about by death and rebirth, all sentient beings have at one time or other been our kind mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and so forth. Although at present such kinsmen of the past may assume the guise of enemies due to the power of *karma*, they nonetheless should be regarded with love and compassion. Virūpa, one of the eighty-four men of great attainment (*mahāsiddha*) who roamed India between the seventh and eleventh centuries C.E. remarks, "Meditate upon compassion towards the kind sentient beings who have reared you with love throughout beginningless time. Although they were your benefactors again and again, they are like men intoxicated who involuntarily commit unwholesome actions."¹⁶ Therefore one owes a debt of gratitude to all sentient beings similar to the debt one owes one's mother in this life.

The Mahāyāna tradition makes much of the figure of the mother and uses the emotional bond most people naturally feel towards their own mothers to great effect in the development of love and compassion towards all sentient beings. In the course of this process, the gratitude that one naturally feels towards one's mother is extended to all sentient beings and becomes the basis of the development of love and compassion. In turn love and compassion form the foundation of the awakening of Enlightenment Consciousness. In the *Śiṣyalekha*,

Candragomin writes, “Kinsmen trapped in the ocean of cyclical existence appear as if they had fallen into a whirlpool, but does not recognize them because of the changes brought about by birth and death. If one were to strive to save oneself having left them behind, wouldn’t it be most shameful? A son or daughter, no matter how wicked, here, would not relish discarding the sentient beings who have been their mothers who lovingly breast fed them while they were helpless upon their laps and who reared them with great love in many hardships.”¹⁷

Therefore, the dedicated cultivation of love and compassion leads one to the intense wish that all sentient beings be happy and that they be free from suffering. Even more, it leads one to the wish that they may not create the causes of suffering, that is unwholesome actions, and that they many instead create the causes of happiness, that is wholesome actions. However the mere wish that all sentient beings may attain ultimate happiness and freedom from suffering is not sufficient to ensure that goal however lofty and desirable it may be is achieved. Indeed, presently, none of us is in a position to ensure the happiness and freedom from suffering of even a few sentient beings, let alone of all of the innumerable sentient beings who, it is said, are as wide in extent as the sky. We are not even in a position to ensure the happiness and freedom from suffering a sentient being for more than the briefest space of time, let alone for all time. Gifts of food, shelter, clothing and the like are not enough to ensure the happiness of sentient beings. Education, social reform, political revolution, none of these can ensure the freedom form suffering of all sentient beings. Indeed, only the Buddha who is endowed with omniscience and skill-in-means (*upāya kauśalya*) is in a position to help all sentient beings to attain ultimate happiness and freedom from suffering. Therefore, if one really wishes to help all sentient beings to attain happiness and freedom from suffering, there is no alternative but to attain Buddhahood for the sake of each and every one of them. Therefore, Enlightenment Consciousness is awakened out of the opposition between ones sincere wish to help all to attain happiness and freedom from suffering and ones present obvious inability to achieve this end.

The awakening of Enlightenment Consciousness brings about a dramatic and decisive change in the nature and status of an individual. This follows from the unique qualities of Enlightenment Consciousness which is unlike any other consciousness to be encountered in the world.

Śāntideva asks, “Has either a father or a mother a thought so beneficial as this? Do the gods, hermits or even Brahmā have such a (beneficial thought)? If those sentient beings never conceived of such a (beneficial) thought even for themselves in a dream, how could they awaken it for the sake of others?”¹⁸ Again he says, “All other virtues are like the plantain tree, having produced their fruits, they perish. Only the tree of Enlightenment Consciousness produces fruits perpetually which increase endlessly.”¹⁹ As a consequence, “even an ordinary individual imprisoned in cyclical existence becomes a son of the Buddha at the moment of awakening Enlightenment Consciousness” and “Enlightenment Consciousness transforms the impure body of an ordinary individual into the priceless jewel of the Buddha’s body.”²⁰ The *Vīradattapariṣcchā Sūtra* sums up the merit of Enlightenment Consciousness in the following way: “If the merit arising from Enlightenment Consciousness had form, it would fill and even overflow the whole of space.”²¹

Conventional Enlightenment Consciousness is defined as the wish to attain supreme and perfect Enlightenment for the sake of others. But conventional Enlightenment Consciousness is of two types: aspiring Enlightenment Consciousness and applied Enlightenment Consciousness. Śāntideva says, “Just as a distinction is perceived between one who wishes to travel and one who actually travels, so the wise should recognize a distinction of degree between these two (types of Enlightenment Consciousness).”²² The awakening of Enlightenment Consciousness constitutes the awakening of the wish to travel, the wish to attain Buddhahood. The actual travel, the practice leading to the attainment of Buddhahood follows in the form of the practice of the perfections (pāramitā). If the awakening of Enlightenment Consciousness marks the birth of a Bodhisattva, then the practice of the perfections constitutes his maturation culminating in his appearance in the form of an accomplished Buddha.

2. The Practice of the Perfections (*pāramitā*)

The applied aspect of conventional Enlightenment Consciousness is the practice of the six principal Perfections: generosity (*dāna*), morality (*śīla*), patience (*kṣāti*), energy (*vīrya*) meditation (*dhyāna*) and wisdom (*prajñā*) of the Bodhisattva. It is the path to Buddhahood. As Nāgārjuna says in the *Suḥrillekha*, “Increase measureless Perfections of generosity, morality, patience, energy, meditation and wisdom, and thus become the Lord of the Conquerors who has reached the further shore of the ocean of existence.”²³

Perfection is the commonly accepted translation of the original term *pāramitā*. Alternative translations have been tried and for the most part rejected. However, it is important to remember that the Perfections are not static achievement, but dynamic activities. The term *pāramitā* has etymological affinities with the terms “parameter” and “meter.” The term implies not so much the achievement of perfection, but the transcendence of perfection.

The practice of the Perfections is portrayed in the accounts of the former lives of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas contained in the Jātaka and the Avadāna literature. Many of these portrayals depict extreme and fantastical behavior on the part of their protagonists. We are told, for example, in one story that in compliance with the practice of the Perfection of generosity, a certain Bodhisattva offered his body to feed a hungry tigress who was about to devour her young.²⁴ Such behavior can hardly be meant to be generally emulated. Indeed, the popular illustrations of the practice of the various Perfections are not meant to be taken literally. Such accounts are not prescriptions for behavior, but rather indications of an extraordinary psychological condition, a condition in which normal patterns of behavior are transcended.

By means of the practice of the Perfections, conventional Enlightenment Consciousness is transformed into ultimate Enlightenment Consciousness. Conventional Enlightenment Consciousness is typical of a traveler on the path to Buddhahood. It assumes the traveler, the path and the goal. It assumes, the world of cyclical existence the final extinction of sorrow and countless sentient beings who have to be saved.

Ultimate Enlightenment Consciousness, on the other hand, is typical of one who has attained the goal of Buddhahood. It is none other than the consciousness of a Buddha, a perfectly enlightened being. In ultimate Enlightenment Consciousness, none of the above are assumed: not the traveler, nor the path, nor the goal, nor the world of cyclical existence, nor extinction, or countless sentient beings. Yet Buddhahood is endowed with inconceivable qualities and is capable of alleviating the suffering of countless sentient beings through compassion, skill-in-means and the like.

The practice of the Perfections is able to transform an aspirant to Buddhahood into a Buddha, because it fulfils the two prerequisites essential for the attainment of Buddhahood. The two are the accumulation of merit (puṇya-saṃbhāra) and the accumulation of knowledge (jñāna-saṃbhāra). The accumulations of merit and knowledge are said to be like the two wings of a bird. Just as a bird cannot fly without two wings, so a Bodhisattva cannot attain Buddhahood without the two accumulations, and it is the practice of the Perfections which provides him with the two accumulations. The practice of the Perfections of generosity, morality and patience enable him to obtain the accumulation of merit, while the practice of the Perfections of meditation and wisdom enable him to obtain the accumulation of knowledge. The practice of the Perfection of energy is necessary for the obtainment of both accumulations. The obtainment of the two accumulations bring about the multidimensional being of Buddhahood. The accumulation of merit results in the phenomenal dimension of Buddhahood (rūpakāya), while the accumulation of knowledge results in the transcendental dimension (dharmakāya).

In the *Ratnāvalī*, Nāgārjuna defines the six Perfections in the following way. Generosity is the complete giving away of ones wealth; morality is benefiting others, patience is the abandonment of anger, energy is to uphold virtue, meditation is one-pointed concentration free of the affliction, and wisdom is to ascertain the meaning of truth.²⁵ The six Perfections have much in common with two other popular formulations of the essential elements of Buddhist practice. They are the threefold division and classification of the parts of the Noble

Eightfold Path,²⁶ i.e., morality, meditation and wisdom (*śīla-samādhi-prajñā*) and generosity, morality and mental culture (*dāna-śīla-bhāvanā*). Like the latter, the Perfections are intended to remove the afflictions and the hindrances to liberation. Therefore generosity is meant to remove greed; morality – unwholesome conduct, patience – anger, energy - laziness, meditation - distraction and wisdom -delusion. Nāgārjuna again in the *Ratnāvalī* goes still further and declares that the Perfections have specific positive fruits. He says, “Through generosity, one obtains wealth; through morality - bliss, through patience - radiance, through energy - splendor, through meditation - peace, through wisdom - liberation and through a loving mind, one accomplishes the purposes of all others.”²⁷

Generosity is the first of the six principal Perfections. The practice of generosity implies the giving of material gifts initially, but eventually it implies the giving of spiritual gifts such as the truth as well. In some cases, it implies renunciation also. Consequently, the practice brings mundane as well as supra-mundane fruits. In the *Suḥrillekha*, Nāgārjuna reminds us that wealth is without substance and undependable. Therefore, he says, one should give to the worthy, the needy and to friends. There is no better kinsman for the next life than generosity.²⁸ Śāntideva indicates the additional dimensions of the practice of generosity when he declares, “At the start, our guide enjoins the giving of vegetables and like. Later when one has become accustomed to that, one gradually becomes able to give away even ones own flesh.”²⁹ He captures beautifully the spirit in which the Bodhisattva practices generosity in the following lines. “In order to accomplish the ends of other sentient beings, I give away my body, my wealth and even all my virtues....By giving up all, ones mind will transcend sorrow.”³⁰

Although much has been made of the ostensible devaluation of morality in Mahāyāna Buddhism, the inclusion of morality in the list of the principle Perfections is sufficient indication of the importance of the morality for the tradition. If morality is subordinated at all to any practice, it is subordinated to wisdom alone and the subordination of morality to wisdom is common to both vehicles.³¹ Non-injury (*ahiṃsā*) is the foundation of Buddhist morality. Formally, it is the avoidance of the ten unwholesome actions.³² In the Mahāyāna, it

is specially accompanied by altruism that is the commitment to actively benefit others through the practices of generosity and the like. Nāgārjuna enjoins one to practice morality, because morality is the basis of all virtues just as the earth is the basis of animate and inanimate things.³³ The *Śīlasamyukta Sūtra* concurs proclaiming that morality is the indispensable prerequisite of all mundane and supra-mundane qualities (dharmas), just as a good vase is the receptacle of jewels.³⁴

Patience is the third of the principal Perfections. Nāgārjuna calls it the highest penance. He assures us that through practicing patience we will attain the irreversible stage of the Bodhisattva's progress towards Buddhahood.³⁵ Even one's enemies are assistants in the practice of patience. Śāntideva says, "My enemy is like a treasure appearing in my house without it being earned by my efforts. Because he is an assistant in the conduct of a Bodhisattva, I should be pleased with this enemy also."³⁶ Like the practice of the other Perfections, the practice of patience is illustrated in many Jātaka and Avadāna tales. Perhaps the most famous textual illustration of the practice of patience is the account of the conduct of the ascetic Kṣantivādin. Although mutilated by a cruel king, Kṣantivādin did not allow even a single thought of anger to enter his mind.³⁷

The Buddhist tradition has always placed an extremely high priority upon the development of energy. The development of energy goes hand in hand with the Buddhist rejection of the alternatives of fate and grace³⁸ and emphasis upon self reliance and self development. In the context of the practice of the Perfections too, the practice of energy has a central role, being needed for both the accumulations of merit and knowledge. Śāntideva declares that Enlightenment exist only for those who possess energy. He defines energy as fondness for virtue.³⁹

Meditation, the next principal Perfection is essential for the obtainment of the accumulation of knowledge. Meditation has long been an integral part of most of the religious traditions of India, but in Buddhism, meditation has a particular role to play which distinguishes it from meditation as it is found in other systems.

In Buddhism, meditation has always to be conjoined with wisdom if it is to have its proper liberating effect. Nāgārjuna states, “Without wisdom, there is no meditation, and again without meditation, there is no wisdom; but for one who has these two, the ocean of existence is made similar to the water in a cow’s hoof-print.”⁴⁰

In meditation, the mind is concentrated exclusively upon a chosen object. Meditation may have for its object a material support such as an image of the Buddha, or an idea such as impersonality or *emptiness*. The *Samādhirāja Sūtra* defines meditation as follows. “A Bodhisattva who places his mind upon an object of meditation such as a beautiful image of the Lord of the world (the Buddha) whose body is similar to the color of gold, is said to be in meditation.”⁴¹ In the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, a more detailed description of the practice of meditation is found. “Once having directed the mind towards the object of meditation, the mind should not be allowed to stray from continually remaining there. Having at once realized that it is distracted, (the mind’s concentration) should be repaired by again placing it upon the object. The wise collect the mind inwards to achieve higher and higher states. Then having seen the good qualities of meditation, one disciplines the mind for meditative concentration. Having seen the defects of distractions, one is unhappy with them and calms the mind. The arising of covetousness, unhappiness and the like should also be pacified. Then the meditator strengthened by commitments along with application of the mind in single-pointed concentration obtained the state of mind which abides within itself.”⁴²

All the foregoing practices from generosity through meditation however are imperfect without wisdom. Wisdom is the most important of the practices of a Bodhisattva, and wisdom alone makes the other practices of generosity and so forth perfect. The *Āryasañcayagāthā* proclaims, “How could even ten million blind men who are ignorant of the way ever reach a city without a guide?” So also if wisdom is missing, these five eyeless Perfections cannot draw near to Enlightenment, because they have no guide.⁴³ Indeed, Śāntideva is in agreement with the entire Buddhist tradition when he says, “It was for wisdom’s sake that the

Sage taught all these items, Therefore wisdom must be awakened by those who wish to end suffering.”⁴⁴

But what is meant by wisdom in this context? Surely it is not prudence; in other words merely conventional wisdom conducive to success in the world. On the contrary, as countless citations from the scriptures make it abundantly clear; it is liberating wisdom – wisdom that enables one to transcend the world. The *Abhidharmakośa* assures us that apart from discriminating wisdom there is no means of extinguishing the afflictions, i.e., attachment, aversion and ignorance. As a consequence, one will continue to wander about in the world of cyclical existence.⁴⁵

In general, the wisdom needed to free one from the world of cyclical existence is of two kinds: analytical and relational or synthetic.⁴⁶ The first is of lesser extent and penetration than the latter. It cannot lead to ultimate liberation, but it is an essential liberation element. The first type of wisdom leads to the understanding of the impersonality of the individual (*pudgala nairātmya*), while the second type leads to the comprehension of the insubstantiality of factors of experience (*dharma nairātmya*).

Two classical illustrations may help to clarify the concepts involved. The first is the well known example of the analysis of the chariot. Just as when it is analyzed, a chariot is seen not to be in the wheels, the pole and the like, but to be simply a convenient name for a collection of parts arranged in a particular way, so the individual, the personality, when analyzed is seen not to be in the body or in the mind, but to be simply a convenient name for a collection of physical and mental factors.⁴⁷ The second example although perhaps less well known, is equally transparent. Just as the light in an oil lamp exists dependent upon the oil and the wick, but is not to be found in either, nor to exist in itself, so also all factors exist dependent upon causes and conditions. They are not to be found in the causes and conditions taken either together or separately, nor are they found to exist in themselves.⁴⁸ Thus while analytical wisdom as exemplified in the case of the chariot reveals the truth of impersonality (*anātmā*);

synthetic wisdom as exemplified in the case of the light of an oil lamp reveals *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*).

The first of these types of wisdom although incomplete because it leaves an elementary residue is nonetheless important. The second is nothing less than the key to liberation. It opens the door, as it were, to the transcendental dimension and it turns the practices of generosity and so forth into Transcendental Practices or Perfections. Technically, the understanding of *emptiness* is said to ensure the purity of the three circles in the practice of the Perfections. The three circles are: the agent, object and action. Therefore, in the case of the practice of generosity, for example, the purity of the three circles means that the Bodhisattva recognizes the *emptiness* of the giver, the recipient and the gift. The same is the case with the other Perfections.

But if ultimately, sentient beings as well as factors of experience are impersonal and empty, then what of compassion? Is it to be abandoned upon the attainment of ultimate Enlightenment Consciousness? Such a consequence would hardly be in keeping with the essential spirit of the Mahāyāna.

The *Mañjuśrīvikurvana Sūtra* declares, “It is Māra’s act if one understands the *emptiness* of each and every thing, and yet abandons sentient beings. It is also Māra’s act if although one has discriminated the truth through wisdom; one still clings to the object of great compassion.”⁴⁹ The great Saraha, another one of the men of great attainment (*mahāsiddha*) is credited with the remark that the supreme path is not gained by the comprehension of *emptiness* if compassion is left behind.⁵⁰ In the *Śikṣā Samuccaya*, Śāntideva declares that one’s merit becomes pure by developing a realization of *emptiness* which has compassion as its essence.⁵¹

Perhaps the meaning of the foregoing citations can be clarified with the help of a simple illustration. Let us suppose that while asleep, one dreams that one is trapped within a burning building. Naturally one will be overcome with fear and will cry out and struggle to free

oneself. Then upon awakening to find oneself safe and sound in one's own bed, one will experience great relief, and one may even smile at the distress one felt a little while earlier, because one will then be certain that it was provoked by the dream. Now suppose that on a subsequent night one notices a friend or a relative thrashing about in bed muttering "fire-fire, help-help." Would one be content to smile, secure in the knowledge that the suffering witnessed was provoked by the merest fantasy, or would one attempt to relieve the suffering of one's companion by awakening him or her from the dream? If one would adopt the latter course, then one would be following in the foot steps of the liberated Bodhisattva who although understands the *emptiness* of sentient beings and the suffering, still undertakes to release countless sentient beings from their pain because of compassion so long as the world exists.

It is perhaps because the union of wisdom and compassion is essential that the four secondary Perfections of the Bodhisattva: skill-in-means (*upāya*), resolution (*praṇidhi*), power (*bala*) and knowledge (*jñāna*) soteriological in nature. In other words, the secondary perfections of which skill-in-means is perhaps the most important are obviously intended to assist the Bodhisattva in his mission to rescue all sentient beings from the suffering of cyclical existence. Having perfected the practices of generosity and the rest, and having developed the four secondary Perfections - skill-in-means and so on - the Bodhisattva has now accomplished the twofold accumulations of merit and knowledge and has attained the multidimensional mode of being of an Enlightenment One, a Buddha. Endowed with the inconceivable powers of the Buddha, he is now in a position to redeem the promise made at the outset of his career - the promise to rescue all sentient beings from the suffering of cyclical existence.

3. Buddhahood

Buddhahood is the highest achievement possible within the Buddhist Tradition, but what exactly is a Buddha? A Buddha is said to be one who has obtained the two accumulations of merit and knowledge and acquired the multiple bodies or dimensions (*kāya*) of Buddhahood.

Although the Buddha possesses divine attributes, He is not a god even for the Mahāyāna. Rather the Buddha is grater than any of the gods. The Buddha does not create the world or determine the destiny of sentient beings, but He does appear in the world in order to teach sentient beings how to liberate themselves from suffering and limitation.

According to the Mahāyāna, each and every sentient being is a potential Buddha. This idea is variously known as the endowment of all with Buddha nature or the possession of the seed of Buddhahood.⁵² The key to the realization of this potential Buddhahood is of course consciousness. According to the *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Laṅkāvatāra* and other Mahāyāna Sūtras, the actual nature of consciousness is empty, pure and luminous. As long as the *emptiness*, purity and luminosity of consciousness remains obscured by the afflictions, the suffering and limitation of the world of cyclical existence is experienced. However, when the actual empty, pure and luminous nature of consciousness is revealed by practice and purification, liberation and Buddhahood are attained. The *Dohakośa* says, “Consciousness alone is the seed of everything and from it *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* proceed. ... Consciousness is like a wish-fulfilling gem that grants every desired fruit.”⁵³

According to the Tibetan Mahāyāna commentarial tradition, consciousness may be likened to a crystal. If a crystal be placed in front of a red or blue background, it will appear red or blue. But the crystal, in itself, has no color. Similarly, if consciousness is affected by the afflictions, it appears in the form of an ordinary sentient being wholly imprisoned in the world of cyclical existence. On the other hand, if consciousness is purified by the antidotes to the afflictions: renunciation, love, compassion and wisdom, it appears in the form of a Bodhisattva or Buddha. But consciousness, in itself, has no definite nature of its own. It is empty or pure. One of the greatest modern exponents of the Tibetan Mahāyāna tradition has offered the following analogy. Suppose that one fashions a lump of bronze into a chamber-pot. It will be used for containing urine and excrement and will be despised by all. Then suppose one melts down the chamber-pot and fashions with the molten bronze a beautiful vessel for offering water at the shrine of the Buddha. It will now serve to carry to be set before an image of the Buddha and will be well thought of by the people. Finally, suppose that once again the vessel

is melted down and with the molten bronze and image of the Buddha Himself is fashioned. The lump of bronze which once was a chamber-pot and despised by all and later became a water offering vessel will now have become an image of the Buddha and will itself have offerings placed before it. In the same way, by the awakening of Enlightenment Consciousness and the practice of the Perfections the afflicted consciousness of an ordinary sentient being is transformed into that of a Bodhisattva and eventually into that of a Buddha. The condition of an ordinary sentient being may be likened to that of the chamber-pot, that of a Bodhisattva to that of the water offering vessel and the condition of a Buddha to that of the image in the analogy.

The crucial point in the transformation of consciousness is the revelation of the integrated vision of *emptiness* and luminosity which is retained to be the actual nature of consciousness and by extension of the whole of reality. The Mahāyāna Sūtras and Śāstras or exegetical treatises supply ample indication of how the integrated vision is to be produced. If summarized, the process proceeds as follows. Firstly, all objects of experience are not different from consciousness. As for consciousness itself, it is neither existent nor non-existent. Its nature is *emptiness* and luminosity. Again analytical and synthetic reasoning is applied to the objective and subjective components of experience that is to the objects of experience and to consciousness itself.

The objects of experience are insubstantial because matter is infinitely divisible. The atom is supposed to be the smallest indivisible element of matter. The experience of material objects however is only possible if an assembly of atoms conjoins to form an extended mass, because the atom itself is invisible. However, if atoms were indeed indivisible, then any number of atoms would coalesce and would occupy only a single point in space. Consequently, there could never occur an extended mass and the experience of material objects would be impossible. On the other hand, if atoms joined together to form an extended mass, then each atom must be supposed to have at least six sides, viz. four sides, a top and a bottom. Then the atom, the smallest element of matter ceases to be indivisible, and by implication the infinite divisibility of matter is established.⁵⁴

The objects of experience only exist relative to and dependent upon consciousness. They have no definite form of their own, but differ in accord with the condition of the perceiving subject. Ārya Asaṅga and Vasubandhu explain that because a single object is seen differently according to the particular class of sentient being to which one belongs, viz. hungry ghost, animal, man or god, they cannot be held to be ultimately existent.⁵⁵ Besides, the objects of experience appear before consciousness even in the absence of any real external object as in the case of objects seen in a dream. The *Samādhirāja Sūtra* says, “Just as people in their homes dream that they experience the joys of objects of sensuous desire, but upon awakening do not experience the desire caused by them, because they know that it was only a dream, so all these things which are seen, heard, touched and cognized are unreal and like a dream.”⁵⁶ Meditative experience as well can serve to vindicate the appearance of objects in the absence of any real external support. In the *Mañjuśrīvikurvana Sūtra*, Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī explains that the appearance of external objects, however hard and solid they may seem, is the effect of the development of the propensities of conceptualizing consciousness. The Bodhisattva goes on to cite the case of a certain Brahmin of Benares who by the power of his meditation succeeded in transforming his body into that of a tiger and so terrified the populous.⁵⁷ Therefore, as the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* declares, “All these three spheres, i.e. the *tridhātu*, are only consciousness.”⁵⁸

In the case of consciousness itself just as in the case of the objects of experience, analytical examination reveals its insubstantiality. The *Vairocana-abhisambodhi Sūtra* declares, “Consciousness was not seen by the Buddhas. It is not seen and will not be seen. Consciousness is not blue; not yellow, not red, not white, not orange and it is not transparent either. Consciousness is neither short, nor long, not round not square. It is neither light nor dark. Consciousness is neither masculine nor feminine nor neuter. Consciousness is not of the nature of the sphere of desire; it is not of the nature of the sphere of form, nor is it of the nature of the formless sphere.”⁵⁹ The *Kāśyapaparivarta* of the *Ratnakūṭa Sūtra* continues in the same vein. “Consciousness is neither inside the body, nor outside the body, nor in between the two. Consciousness is not perceived because of its non-existence. ... If

consciousness is thoroughly sought for, it will not be found. Any entity that cannot be found is not perceived, because of its non-existence. Any entity that is not perceived exists neither in the past, nor in the future, nor in the present.”⁶⁰

But once again, just as in the case of objects, consciousness only exists dependently and relatively, and in this case, consciousness depends upon objects for its existence. In the *Madhyamakāvātāra*, Candrakīrti explains, “Just as object do not exist, so likewise consciousness does not exist. ... Whatever is established to exist through mutual dependence is not truly existent.”⁶¹ In the *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṅkāra*, it is said, “Having understood that nothing other than consciousness exists, know then that consciousness also does not exist. The wise know that both subject and object do not exist and dwell in the sphere of reality which has neither.”⁶² In the *Madhyāntavibhāga* and *Madhyāntavibhāga Bhāṣya*, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu explain that because objects are non-existent, so too consciousness – the perceiving subject – does not exist.⁶³ Śāntideva and Śāntarakṣita both emphasize that consciousness apart from objects is unsustainable.⁶⁴

The *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya Sūtra* proclaims that the five aggregates (skandha) from matter through consciousness are empty. According to the Sūtra, all factors of experience (dharma) are characterized by *emptiness*. They are un-originated and un-extinguished. The eighteen elements from the eye element to the element of mind-consciousness do not exist. Ignorance, old age and death as well as the destruction of old age and death do not exist. The Four Noble Truths of suffering and so forth also do not exist.⁶⁵ Elsewhere in the Perfection of Wisdom literature all factors of experience are likened to stars, a fault of vision, a lamp, a magical show, dewdrops, bubbles, dream, lightning and clouds.

But *emptiness* is not a metaphysical entity. *Emptiness* is only a pedagogical device intended to correct the mistaken belief in the ultimate existence of entities or factors of experience.⁶⁶ Indeed, things are not altogether non-existent either. Nāgārjuna declares that those who conceive of existence and non-existence have not understood the teaching of the Buddha.⁶⁷ The conceptions of existence and non-existence are obstacles to liberation.⁶⁸ In the *Ratnāvalī*,

he declares, “Thus ultimately this world is beyond truth or falsity. Therefore He (the Buddha) does not assert that it really exists or does not exist.”⁶⁹ In the *Catuṣṣataka*, Āryadeva affirms that the real state of things transcends existence, non-existence, both existence and non-existence and neither existence nor non-existence.⁷⁰ Therefore *emptiness* implies neither existence nor non-existence. It is ineffable.

Emptiness is also not different from matter and the other aggregates. The *Prajñāpāramitā hṛdaya Sūtra* proclaims, “Matter is *emptiness* and the very *emptiness* is matter; *emptiness* does not differ from matter, matter does not differ from *emptiness*. ...The same is true of feeling, perception, volition and consciousness.”⁷¹

Therefore, all factors of experience, objects as well as consciousness are empty, but *emptiness* transcends the alternatives of existence and non-existence. The positive content of *emptiness*, that is the apprehension that *emptiness* is not non-existence, receives the epithet “pure” or “luminous”. Therefore *emptiness* and luminosity come to be integrated in a single unified vision of reality. The integrated vision of *emptiness* and luminosity corresponds to the actual nature of consciousness and it is reflected in the apprehension of the non-differentiation of all factors of experience including cyclical existence (saṃsāra) and extinction (nirvāṇa). The integrated vision of *emptiness* and luminosity is similarly reflected in the wisdom and compassion of the advanced Bodhisattvas and the Buddhas, in the contemporaneous disengagement and reengagement that is the non-abiding (apraṭiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa)⁷² of the Mahāyāna and in the multidimensional being of Buddhahood.

There are two principle dimensions of Buddhahood: the transcendental dimension (dharma-kāya) and the phenomenal dimension (rūpa-kāya). The transcendental dimension of Buddhahood is altogether beyond conception, expression and appearance. The phenomenal dimension, on the other hand, is endowed with an infinite variety of conceptions, expressions and appearances. Principally, the infinite number and variety of the occurrences of the phenomenal dimension are divided into two categories. They are: the refulgent dimension (saṃbhoga-kāya) and the created dimension (nirmāṇa-kāya). I should prefer to call them, the

celestial and terrestrial dimension respectively. The celestial dimension appears in the form of the heavenly Buddhas and Bodhisattvas such as Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Maitreya and others. It is to the celestial dimension that Nāgārjuna refers when he exhorts us to become like Avalokiteśvara and Amitābha. “Born like Ārya Avalokiteśvara aiding through (his) conduct many afflicted people and dispelling disease, old age, attachment and aversion, dwell for limitless lifetimes like the protector of the world the Blessed One Amitābha in his Buddha-field.”⁷³ The direct apprehension - except of course in the form of images and paintings - of the celestial dimension however is vouchsafe only to advanced practitioners who have purified their minds to a sufficient degree. The great Aśaṅga, for example, meditated for many years before the celestial Bodhisattva Maitreya appeared to him directly.

The terrestrial dimension by contrast is available practically to all irrespective of their level of mental development. The terrestrial dimension of Buddhahood produces one very special manifestation in a given period. That special manifestation is the historical Buddha, in our case Śākyamuni. However in addition to the special manifestation, the terrestrial dimension constantly assumes all kinds of forms for the benefit of sentient beings. Often the forms assumed that of an ordinary sentient being. Such occurrences of the terrestrial dimension of Buddhahood need not always be in the form of a readily recognizable friend of virtue (kalyāṇa-mitra). The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, for example, tells us that the Buddha can appear in the form of a gambler or a drunkard as well.⁷⁴ The terrestrial dimension can also occur in the form of inanimate objects. Śāntideva, in articulating his prayer for Buddhahood says, “So long as sentient beings are ill in the world, may I be (for them) a cure, (their) medicine, physician and nurse; may I become a rainfall of food and drink to quench the pains of hunger and thirst during the famine (which occurs) between the eons, may I become food and drink. May I become an inexhaustible treasure for the poor; may I come before them as property of many shapes and kinds.”⁷⁵

In this way, having attained Buddhahood through the obtainment of the two accumulations, replete with wisdom, compassion and skill-in-means, one acquires the multi-dimensional being of a Buddha, empty and luminous. Spontaneously, like a wind-chime that automatically

responds to the currents of air that touch it with appropriate and harmonious sounds, one will respond to the needs of all sentient beings, helping each in his own way and in his own time to achieve happiness and liberation.

End Notes

1Nāgārjuna, *Ratnāvalī* I. 3.

2 The eight freedoms: 1. holding wrong views, 2. birth in a non-religious land, 3. birth in a land where the Buddhist religion is not taught, 4. birth as a fool, 5. Birth in hell, 6. birth among hungry ghosts, 7. birth among animals, 8. birth among the gods.

The ten endowments: 1. birth among human beings, 2. birth where the Buddhist religion flourishes, 3. birth with a body having all five senses, 4. birth into a life free from the five heinous sins, 5. having respect for the Buddhist teaching, 6. the presence of a Buddha during the age in which one is born, 7. the presence of the teaching of the Buddha, 8. The flourishing of the practice of Buddhism, 9. the existence of the monastic community, 10. being under the care of a teacher or a patron.

3 There is an extensive literature devoted to the preliminary practices in the texts which belong to the class of graduated path or “Lam-rim” teachings.

4 *Dhammapada*. XIV. 5.

5 i.e., aspiring Enlightenment Consciousness and applied Enlightenment Consciousness (to be treated later).

6 The Jātaka story recounted in the passage obviously has profound symbolic meaning. For example, the ocean can be interpreted as a metaphor for the world of cyclical existence while the blindness of the Bodhisattva’s mother may be seen as a symbolic of the ignorance of sentient beings.

7Lobsang Dagpa, Ngawang Samten Chopel and Jared Rhoton. (trans.) *quoted* in the *Beautiful Ornament of the Three Visions*. Singapore: Golden vase Publications, 1987. p. 122.

8*ibid.* P. 115.

9*ibid.* P. 125.

10*ibid.*

11Śāntideva. *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. VIII. 90.

12*ibid.* 96

13*ibid.* 134.

14*ibid.* VI. 113.

15Jampal L, Ngawang Samten Chophel and Della Santinna P. *Nāgārjuna's Letter to King Gautamīputra* (Suhṛllekha). Delhi: Motilalbanarsidass, 1983. Verse 67.

16*quoted in the Beautiful Ornament of the Three Visions* p. 120.

17*ibid.* p. 113.

18*Bodhicaryāvatāra*, I. 23-24.

19*ibid.* 12.

20*ibid.* 9-10

21*quoted in the Beautiful Ornament of the Three Visions* p. 132.

22*Bodhicaryāvatāra*, I. 15-16.

23*Nāgārjuna's Letter to king Gautamīputra.* Verse 8.

24 Dayal H. *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature.* Delhi: Motilalbanarsidass. 1970. p. 182.

25 Nāgārjuna, *Ratnāvalī*, V. 436-437.

26 The eight parts of the path are: right understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration.

27 *op. cit.* V. 438.

28 *Nāgārjuna's Letter to King Gautamīputra*, Verse 6.

29 *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, VII. 25.

30 *ibid.* III. 10-11.

31 One need only recall the appearance of *śīlabrataparāmarśa* among the first three fetters overcome by the Stream-winner.

32 i.e., three of body: killing, stealing and sexual misconduct, four of speech: lying, abuse, slander and gossip, and three of mind: envy, malice and erroneous views.

- 33 *Nāgārjuna's Letter to King Gautamīputra*. Verse 7.
- 34 *quoted* in the Lozang Jinpa's commentary to the *Suḥṛllekha*. *ibid.* p. 6.
- 35 *Nāgārjuna's Letter to King Gautamīputra* Verse 15.
- 36 *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, VI. 107.
- 37 Kṣemendra, *Avadānakalpalatā*, (vol. 1) India: Mithila Institute Darbhanga, 1959. p. 205.
- 38 Fate that is predestination, and graces that is proceeding from a divine power. Both look for salvation through what may be termed other power, rather than self power. Both species of view were represented in ancient India.
- 39 *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, VII. 1-2.
- 40 *Nāgārjuna's Letter to King Gautamīputra*. Verse 107.
- 41 *quoted* in the *Beautiful Ornament of the Three Visions*, p. 164.
- 42 *ibid.* pp. 166-167.
- 43 *ibid.* p. 171.
- 44 *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, IV. 1.
- 45 *quoted* in the *Beautiful Ornament of the Three Visions*, p.177.
- 46 Synthetic in the sense that it requires the consideration of the relations between two or more extended factors.
- 47 See *Milindapañhā*
- 48 *Majjhima Nikāya*, III. Dialogue 140.
- 49 *quoted* in the *Beautiful Ornament of the Three Visions*, p. 172.
- 50 *ibid.*
- 51 *ibid.* p. 173.
- 52 Literally, *tathāgatagarbha* or *ratnagotra* that is the womb of the Tathāgata – an epithet of the Buddha, or the jewels family or clan.
- 53 *quoted* in the *Beautiful Ornament of the Three Visions*. p. 183.

54 Diñnāga. *Ālambana-parikṣā*.

55 *Madhyāntavibhāga* and *Madhyāntavibhāga Bhāṣya*. I.3.

56 quoted in the *Beautiful Ornament of the Three Visions*. p. 179.

57 *ibid.* p. 180.

58 *ibid.* p. 177.

59 *ibid.* pp. 184-185.

60 *ibid.* p. 185.

61 *ibid.* p. 181.

62 *ibid.* p. 182.

63 *Madhyāntavibhāga* and *Madhyāntavibhāga Bhāṣya*, I. 3.

64 *Bodhicaryāvatāra* IX. 27-29; and *Madhyamakālaṅkārikā*, 52-60.

65 See Conze E., *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (containing the Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra), London: George Allen and Unwin, 1958.

66 Nāgārjuna. *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. XII. 11.

67 *ibid.* XV. 6-7.

68 Nāgārjuna. *Ratnāvalī*. I. 56.

69 *ibid.* II. 104-105.

70 quoted in the *Madhyamakālaṅkārikā*, 68.

71 *op. cit.* Conze, E. *Buddhist Wisdom Books*.

72 Non-abiding, because liberated by wisdom, the Buddha or Bodhisattva does not abide in nirvana either.

73 Nāgārjuna's letter to King Gautamīputra. Verses 120b-121.

74 See Suzuki, D.T. *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1932, 1973.

75 *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. III. 7-9.