

RETURN TO THE SOURCE

The point of departure of *Prajñāparamita* thought is the notion of *emptiness*. In the beginning, as we know, the word *emptiness* signified the absence of a permanent self. When the Sarvastivada school declared that from the phenomenal point of view, things do not exist as permanent identities, but that the true nature of things exists from the ontological standpoint, it can be seen that this permanent identity of things became disguised as an ontological entity. The *Prajñāparamita* explains: "Things do not have their own nature; the ontological entity of things does not exist." The *Prajñāparamita*, through this declaration, brings us back to the source of Buddhism.

The notions of impermanence, not-self, interbeing, and emptiness are means aimed at revealing the errors of knowledge rather than at giving a description of the objects of knowledge. These notions must be considered as *methods* and not as *information*. According to the *Vajracchedika Prajñāparamita*, this is the most important problem of all. The Buddha said to Subhuti, who asked him what was the method to attain correct understanding:

This is how the bodhisattva mahasattvas master their thinking. "However many species of living beings there are—whether born from eggs, from the womb, from moisture, or spontaneously; whether they

have form or do not have form; whether they have perceptions or do not have perceptions; or whether it cannot be said of them that they have perceptions or that they do not have perceptions, we must lead all these beings to the ultimate nirvana so that they can be liberated. And when this innumerable, immeasurable, infinite number of beings has become liberated, we do not, in truth, think that a single being has been liberated."

Why is this so? If, Subhuti, a bodhisattva holds on to the idea that a self, a person, a living being, or a life span exists, that person is not an authentic bodhisattva.

Why are ideas the source of errors that must be corrected? Because the idea is not reality. "To lead all beings to nirvana" is reality itself; but "to lead," "all beings," "nirvana," "the bringer," and the "brought" are only concepts. And why is there such a great distance between reality and the concept? In reality in itself, there is no discrimination. But in the world of concepts "reality" is full of discriminations: subject/object, self/not-self, etc. This is not truly reality but an erroneous image of reality. The origin of this erroneous image is called *discrimination* or *imagination* (*vikalpa*) in the Vijñānavadin school.

The flower that is near the window is a true flower in its undiscriminated reality. As soon as we discriminate, it is no longer revealed. In its place stands an erroneous image. The

word "empty," which at first signified the absence of permanent identity, now acquires another meaning: the image created by the concept does not represent any reality, it is imaginary.

THE A WHICH IS NOT A IS TRULY A

In the *Vajracchedika-prajñāparamita*, we find many expressions given in the form, "The A which is not A is truly A." Let us take these examples: "What the Tathagata calls a living being is not in essence a living being. That is why it is called a living being." "Subhuti, what is called a conception of dharmas is not a conception of dharmas. That is why it is called a conception of dharmas." This means that *reality is only reality when it is not grasped conceptually*. What we construct through our concepts is not reality. "This flower, which is not a concept, is truly a flower." Here again is the rejection of the principle of a permanent self and of the tendency to see things by means of the go-between of conceptualization. The practitioner of the Way must enter into direct contact with reality without allowing concepts to separate him from this reality. Reality cannot be conceived, nor can it be described in words. *Reality is reality, it is thus*. This is the significance of the word *thusness* (tathata).

The *Prajñāparamita* begins with this declaration: there is no true nature, there is no permanent self. *Emptiness* was offered as

a means. When we begin to take it as the reality, we need an antidote.

The *Maharatnakuta* says:

Attachment to erroneous views is comparable to a sickness. All erroneous views can be cured; only attachment to the view of emptiness is incurable. Attachments to the view of being piled as high as a great mountain are preferable to attachment to nonbeing.¹

For this reason true emptiness is identical to the tathata, which is non-discriminated and non-conceptualized reality. Many go too far in seeing emptiness or tathata as the ontological basis of everything. The idea of an ontological entity, as we already know, is the notion of an absolute self in disguise, which is the enemy of the *Prajñāparamita*. All that can be said is that emptiness or tathata is non-conceptualized reality. All concepts about emptiness are the enemies of emptiness, all concepts about the tathata are the enemies of the tathata. To arrive at the reality of emptiness or tathata will be to arrive at the Great Understanding. Let us read this dialogue in the *Astasahasrika Prajñāparamita*:

Subhuti: It is truly marvelous that the tathata can reveal the true nature of things when nothing can be said about this true nature of things! Have I understood

¹ *Kasyapa parivarta* of the *Maharatnakuta Sutra*.

you correctly, Lord, when I say that we cannot say anything about things themselves?

Buddha: It is true; we cannot speak about things.

Subbuti: And things that transcend words, can they grow or diminish?

Buddha: No, they cannot.

Subbuti: If it is thus, the six practices of the paramita² cannot progress. How then can the bodhisattva arrive at complete enlightenment? How can we realize complete enlightenment without perfecting the six paramitas?

Buddha: Subbuti, nothing grows or diminishes in the nature of the six paramitas. The bodhisattva who practices the paramita of generosity, who develops the paramita of generosity, and who practices skillful means never thinks, "This paramita of generosity is in the process of growing or declining." On the contrary, he thinks "The paramita of generosity is nothing other than words." When the bodhisattva offers something to someone he offers his whole heart and all the merits of this act as a gift of wisdom to all beings. This offering expresses the method of realization of total generosity. When he

² The six practices that lead to absolute enlightenment are generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom.

practices discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom he acts in the same way.

Subbuti: And what is complete enlightenment?

Buddha: It is tathata. Tathata neither increases nor decreases. If the mind of the bodhisattva remains at peace in the tathata, the bodhisattva is close to complete enlightenment; and he can never lose this. Reality transcends words and concepts and does not contain the paramitas, or dharmas, neither does it increase or decrease. When the bodhisattva remains in this mind, he is one close to complete enlightenment.

PENETRATING TATHATA

The identification of tathata with emptiness is an attempt to prevent people from conceptualizing emptiness. Similarly, the *Mahaprajñāparamita Sastra* puts forward the expression *non-empty* (*asunyata*). The *non-empty* is another name for *emptiness* and for *tathata*. The *non-empty* is treated in the *Mahayana Sraddhotpada* by Asvaghosa in a very appropriate way. After confirming that the tathata of things cannot be described by words or represented by concepts, Asvaghosa states that a method exists by which to penetrate tathata; it consists of "following skillfully." According to Asvaghosa, this supposes abandoning our dual-

istic tendencies. When we speak of something, we do not distinguish the subject who speaks from the object spoken of. When we see something, we do not distinguish the subject who sees from the object seen. When we are able to transcend discrimination, we begin to penetrate the world of tathata. "Following skillfully," according to Asvaghosa, is to clear a path amid the words and concepts in order to arrive at reality.

Words and concepts can be used without allowing ourselves to be taken in by them. In fact, words and concepts can be quite useful and even indispensable. On the level of words and concepts, two forms of tathata can be distinguished—emptiness and non-emptiness. It is because emptiness is not a concept that one calls it *true emptiness*, and it is because non-emptiness is not a concept either that one calls it *true non-emptiness*. All of this is designed to combat the *concept of emptiness*, which is the primary enemy of emptiness.

SUBJECT AND OBJECT

Discrimination between subject and object (a dualistic tendency) is the cause of all error concerning both knowledge and practice. The attitude of the *Prajñāparamita* vis-à-vis knowledge and method is expressed very clearly in this passage from the *Astasahasrika Prajñāparamita*, which can be seen as a true Zen text:

Subhuti: How must a bodhisattva practice in order to see clearly that things do not have their own nature?

Buddha: Forms must be seen as devoid of the true nature of form; sensations must be seen as devoid of the true nature of sensation. It is the same concerning the other sense organs and their objects.

Subhuti: If things are devoid of true nature, how can the bodhisattva realize perfect wisdom?

Buddha: It is non-realization which is in the process of realizing perfect wisdom.

Subhuti: Why is this realization a non-realization?

Buddha: Because we cannot conceive wisdom nor the bodhisattva who practices wisdom, as we cannot conceive realization, the one who realizes, the methods of realization, or the means of realization. The realization of wisdom is therefore a non-realization in which all speculation is useless.

Subhuti: If this is so, how can a beginner realize wisdom?

Buddha: From the first moment of awareness, the bodhisattva must meditate on the inaccessible nature, or non-attainability [*anupalambha*], of things. While practicing the six paramitas, the bodhisattva must say to himself that there is nothing to be attained.

Subbuti: What is attainment? What is non-attainment?

Buddha: Where object and subject still exist, attainment exists. Where the object and subject cease to exist, non-attainment exists.

Subbuti: What is the subject-object and what is the non-subject-object?

Buddha: Where the distinction between eye and form, ear and sound, nose and smell, tongue and taste, body and sensation, cogitation and thought still exists, where the distinction between the person who realizes enlightenment and the enlightenment that is realized exists, the subject-object exists. Where there is no longer a distinction between eye and form, ear and sound, nose and smell, tongue and taste, body and sensation, cogitation and thought, where there is no longer the person who realizes enlightenment and the enlightenment realized, there there is no longer subject-object.

THE THREE GATES OF LIBERATION

The Ts'ao T'ung school, as we know, emphasizes the importance of non-attainment. This position reflects the spirit of the

Prajñāpāramitā. The principles of "meditation without subject" and "practice and enlightenment are one" certainly derive from the principle of non-attainment. It must be recognized here that the doctrine of non-attainment has as its origin the notion of *aimlessness* (*apranihita*) in early Buddhism. The *Digha Nikaya*, *Lalita Vistara*, *Abhidharmakosa Sastra*, *Vibhāsa*, and *Visudhimagga* all speak of this in the context of the "three gates of liberation."

The three gates of liberation are *emptiness* (*sunyata*), *signlessness* (*animitta*), and *aimlessness* (*apranihita*). *Emptiness* is the absence of permanent identity of things. *Signlessness* is the nature of non-conceptualization of things. *Aimlessness* is the attitude of someone who does not feel the need to run after anything, realize or obtain anything. It is, for example, not pursuing enlightenment as an object of knowledge. The Sanskrit word "apranihita" means "to put nothing in front of oneself." The *Vibhāsa*, *Abhidharmakosa Sastra*, and *Visudhimagga* have the tendency to interpret aimlessness as non-desire; since things are impermanent, one must not run after them. For the same reason these texts interpret signlessness as the false value of data provided by the sense organs.

The three gates of liberation are therefore interpreted by the majority of early Buddhist texts from a moral rather than an epistemological point of view. In Mahayana Buddhism in general, and Zen in particular, a close relationship can be found among the three gates. Absence of an absolute identity in each thing (emptiness) is manifested by the non-conceptual (signlessness) knowledge in which a subject in quest of an

object does not exist (aimlessness). In the true knowledge of reality, the distinction between subject and object, obtaining and obtained, no longer exists.

But if aimlessness means the cessation of the desire vis-à-vis impermanent things, it could be said that in this case the desire vis-à-vis liberation, or the desire for enlightenment, still exists, which is radically opposed to the idea of aimlessness in the *Prajñāparamita* and in Zen. Jacques Gernet, in the introduction to his translation of *Conversations with Master Shen Hui*,³ speaks of the sudden enlightenment of Zen as being a special product of Chinese Zen Buddhism, which does not exist in Indian Buddhism. In my opinion, this is not correct. The notion of non-attainment in the *Prajñāparamita* was the basis for the doctrine of sudden enlightenment. The passages of the *Prajñāparamita* that we have cited clearly demonstrate this.

THE EIGHT NEGATIONS OF NAGARJUNA

In the second century C.E., Nagarjuna systematized *Prajñāparamita* thought. He compiled the *Mahāprajñāparamita Sastra*, the *Madhyamika Sastra*, and the *Dvadasanikaya Sastra*. His disciple, Arya Deva, compiled the *Sata Sastra* in the same line

³ Published in Hanoi in 1949.

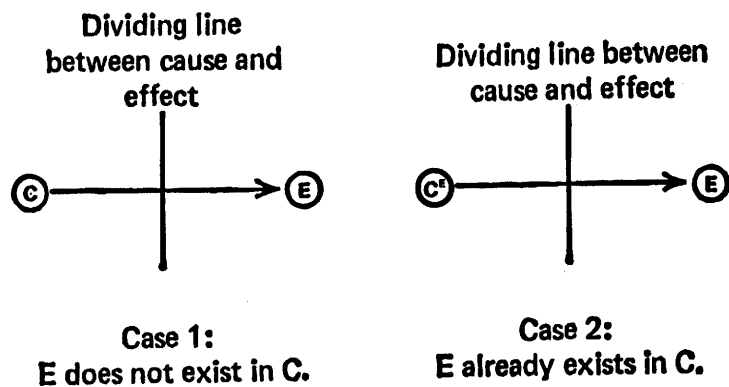
of thought. Nagarjuna's three texts later became the foundation of a Mahayana school called Madhyamika in India and San Lun in China. Candrakirti was the founder of the Madhyamika and Ki Tsang that of San Lun.

The method of the Madhyamika demonstrates the absurdity and uselessness of concepts and aims at showing the reality of emptiness as dealt with by the *Prajñāparamita*. It is not a linguistic philosophy, a simple play of words, or an intellectual exercise. The aim of the Madhyamika is to reduce all concepts to absurdity in order to open the door of non-conceptual knowledge. It is not the intention of the Madhyamika to propose a view of reality in order to set it up in opposition to other views of reality. *All views*, according to the Madhyamika, are erroneous, because the views are not reality. The Madhyamika is, therefore, proposed as a method and not as a doctrine. This makes the Madhyamika the legitimate heir to the *Prajñāparamita* thought.

In his *Madhyamika Sastra*, Nagarjuna proposes the following eight negations:

There is no generation;
 There is no destruction;
 There is no continuation;
 There is no interruption;
 There is no unity;
 There is no plurality;
 There is no arriving;
 There is no departing.

This is the negation of the eight fundamental concepts through which reality is habitually considered. Other concepts derived from it, such as cause/effect, time/space, subject/object, etc., are also analyzed and finally rejected by Nagarjuna as simply products of discriminative knowledge. When speaking of generation, for example, one also speaks of the object generated, but if one goes in search of this object, one does not find it. Generation is not possible without an object that is generated. Nothing generates itself, says Nagarjuna, because generation as such does not exist. To demonstrate this, Nagarjuna poses the question: before the effect E is produced as a function of the cause C, does the effect E already exist within the cause C?



If we reply (case 1) that the effect E does not exist in the cause C, Nagarjuna demonstrates to us that in this case generation is not possible. Indeed, if there is no relation between C and E, if E does not exist in C, it is impossible that E should

arise from C. A chick cannot be born of a table; a chick is born from an egg. If we reply (case 2) that E already exists in cause C, Nagarjuna demonstrates to us that, in this case, E has no need of being generated since it already exists. The relation between an egg and a chick is not a relation of cause and effect; it is of becoming and not generation. The concept of *generation* is thus rendered absurd. In the process of his analysis, the nature of impermanence, not-self, and emptiness of what we believe to be the object of generation and of destruction can be seen.

THE MIDDLE WAY

All concepts are destroyed in the same way by Nagarjuna, who takes every precaution necessary to avoid replacing one concept with another. In the process of analyzing the concept *generation*, for example, the concepts "becoming" and "non-production" are brought forth. Both these concepts must also succumb to Nagarjuna's dialectic. This dialectic aims at combating concepts in such a way that the concepts that are diametrically opposed to them cannot be used. For this reason it is called "The Middle Way." The term "middle" does not signify a synthesis between opposing concepts, such as "being" and "nonbeing," "generation" and "destruction." It signifies the transcendence of all concepts.

This dialectic is also expressed in the principle of the *two*

truths: absolute truth (*paramartha satya*) and relative truth (*samvritti satya*). In its pure form, presented by an enlightened person, dialectic is absolute truth. Seized by concepts, it becomes relative truth. To render it absolute once more, it is necessary to take a new step; and if it is still conceptualized, another step must be taken in order to bring it back to its pure, original form.

Conceptual Description (relative truth)	Non-Conceptual Description in a dialectic form (absolute truth)
Being	Nonbeing
Being and nonbeing	Neither being nor nonbeing
Being and nonbeing — neither being nor nonbeing	Neither nonbeing nor non-nonbeing
Neither nonbeing nor non- nonbeing	Neither "neither nonbeing" nor "nor non-nonbeing," etc.

According to the principles of the "three gates of liberation," negation, therefore, has the role of breaking down concepts to the point where the practitioner comes to rid himself of all discrimination and penetrates undiscriminated reality. Dialectic aims at producing a transforming crisis and not at expounding a truth. In this close relationship between the language and attitude of Zen, Prajñāparamita thought and Madhyamika thought can be clearly seen.

Zen Masters do not use dialectic in the way that Nagarjuna does, but their words, acts, and looks also have the function of

combating concepts, of producing crises, and of creating conditions that arrive at releasing the vision of reality. If we were to spend our days in a Zen monastery studying Prajñāparamita and Madhyamika texts, there would not be enough time to practice Zen. But these texts are available, even in the monastery, and can be consulted at any time.

THE VIJÑANAVADA SCHOOL

The Vijñānavada school, which benefits considerably from the researches of the Sarvastivada school and inherits from it to some extent, also deals with the problem of tathata, as did Prajñāparamita thought, but from the phenomenological view. The most fundamental texts of the Vijñānavada school are the *Sandhivimocana Sutra*, which appeared during the middle of the second century, and the *Lankavatara Sutra*, which appeared during the beginning of the third century C.E. According to Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, the *Lankavatara* is not a true Vijñānavada text, but a Zen text. The reason for this, he says, is that it is the only text transmitted by Bodhidharma, the First Zen Ancestor, to his disciple Hui Ko, and, further, the text emphasizes the importance of the inner spiritual experience of Buddha and of reaching enlightenment. But, in fact, nearly all Buddhist texts speak about this spiritual experience and about reaching enlightenment. It cannot be said that the *Prajñāparamita* texts are not *basic* Zen texts; on the contrary, the

ZEN KEYS



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