

The Core Elements of Indian Buddhism Introduced into Tibet

A Contrast with Japanese Buddhism

YAMAGUCHI Zuihō

THE FIRST CONTACT THE Tibetan people had with Buddhism took place in the early part of the seventh century. According to written records, the Ra mo che built in Lhasa in 646 CE was the first temple in Tibet to erect an image of the Buddha. The construction of the great bSam yas monastery began in 775, and the earliest recorded reference to a Tibetan monk dates from 779. The completion of the great hall of dBu rtse in that same year meant that six Tibetans were able to be ordained without waiting for the entire complex to be finished in 787. The ordaining minister was the celebrated Indian master Śāntarakṣita, author of two classic works, the *Tattvasaṃgraha* (an introduction to the various schools of Indian philosophy) and the *Madhyamakālamkāra* (a treatise on the quintessence of Buddhist thought). He is reported to have passed away before the completion of the bSam yas monastery.

It was also during this time—around 786—that the Tibetan army occupied Sha zhou (including Tun-huang), thus consolidating Tibet's control over the territory of the Silk Road after a battle with the T'ang Chinese that had been going on since the middle of the seventh century. The central Asian country of bDe khams was set up as a Tibetan colony. Intent on introducing various aspects of Buddhism into his country, the ruler of Tibet, Khri srong lde btsan (742–797), invited the Ch'an master Mo-ho-yen 摩訶衍 (the same Chinese characters used to transliterate "Mahayana"), who had been propagating Buddhism in the Tun-huang area, to come and preach the Dharma at the bSam yas monastery. A small number of Chinese monks had already been at bSam yas from around 781, and Śāntarakṣita was struck by the difference between their Buddhist

teachings and what he had learned in India. It is said that he thus called for a debate on the issue, and predicted in a last will composed before his death that Kamalaśīla would be invited from India to represent Indian Buddhism.

Mo-ho-yen taught that one could attain liberation merely by sitting in meditation (*zazen*) until achieving a “nonconceptual and nonperceptive” (不思不觀) state, and that no other practice could achieve such results. In 791 Queen ’Bro bza’, beside herself with grief at the loss of her son, took the tonsure, with her consorts, under Mo-ho-yen. This prompted a rapid increase in the number of Mo-ho-yen’s followers as people began to turn away from the stricter form of Indian Buddhism, which taught the elimination of human egoism and the practice of altruistic deeds.

When an exchange of letters between representatives of Indian Buddhism and the master Mo-ho-yen concerning these matters reached the attention of King Khri srong lde btsan, who had established Buddhism as the national religion of Tibet, he concluded that Mo-ho-yen’s Ch’an was antisocial and in 793 ordered him to stop teaching. But Ch’an had already sunk its roots too deeply in Tibetan society to be so easily extracted. For some time intense opposition was leveled against the king’s action, including protest by suicide. By the following year the king was obliged to retract his decree and invited Kamalaśīla to debate Mo-ho-yen at the bSam yas monastery. To make a long story short, Mo-ho-yen lost the debate and, under conditions agreed to in advance, had to leave the country. And so it was that “Indian Buddhism” came to be proclaimed the correct form of Buddhism for Tibet.¹

My point in briefly recounting this story is to bring into question the widespread assumption, in Japan and elsewhere, that Buddhism is something more or less like what Mo-ho-yen taught. In fact, even within the Chinese Ch’an tradition itself one finds a strong current of thinking that is closer to Indian Buddhism than it is to the teachings of Mo-ho-yen. The Ch’an that Dōgen learned in China, for example, may be viewed this way. As Kamalaśīla reminds us in his detailed three-volume critique, the *Bhāvanākrama*, one must beware of painting the whole of Chinese Buddhism with the brush of Mo-ho-yen’s Ch’an. Taking this work and Śāntarakṣita’s *Madhyamakālaṃkāra* as my points of reference, I would like to take a look at the chief marks of what is taken to be “proper” or “correct” Buddhism in the Tibetan tradition, with particular attention to the distinction between “bodhi-wisdom” and “liberation.”

The defining characteristics of Indian Buddhism as we find it expounded in these texts can be summarized in three points.

First, the purpose of Buddhism is not “liberation” (*mukta*, *vimokṣa*) but the realization of “wisdom” (*bodhi*) for the practice of “great compassion” (*mahākaruṇā*).

Second, unlike satori, bodhi-wisdom is not seen as an experience of sensory perception, but as an attainable existential realm and state of latent consciousness.

Third, to achieve bodhi-wisdom, one must begin by cultivating an awareness of the a priori actuality of the phenomenal world that can be expressed in words, and then pass beyond words to the habit of revisioning the world in terms of an a priori flow of causal relations and lack of a graspable substance.

In the concrete, this process entails eradicating attachment to self by the diligent perfection of prajna-wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) and by the cultivation of a latent consciousness that breaks with the idea of the self as something in search of itself. The desired result is that one begin to act spontaneously out of compassion to serve others, and that this action in turn provide the solid and continuing foundation for a new way of life.

Not only does the Buddhism of “sitting in meditation” that Mo-ho-yen advocated not contain these three elements, it points in the very opposite direction. We find his position laid out in the Tun-huang text of “The Ratification of True Mahayana Principles for an Abrupt Awakening to the Truth.”²

BODHI IS NOT LIBERATION

To begin with, consider Mo-ho-yen’s response to a question by a follower of Indian-style Buddhism on “whether or not the practice of the six perfections (*pāramitā*) and other Buddhist practices are necessary”:

In terms of mundane meaning (*saṃvṛti-satya*), it is not that [the practice of the six perfections] is not necessary; the practice of the six perfections and other practices are expedient means directed at clarifying supreme meaning (*paramārtha-satya*). In terms of supreme meaning, “necessary” or “not necessary” cannot even be verbalized with regard to the practice of the six perfections and other practices, since [supreme meaning] transcends verbal expression. This is widely taught in the sutras. [80a–b]

The expression “expedient means” (*upāya*) as used in this context does not reflect the original positive sense of the term. Like the meaning its Japanese equivalent *hōben* has come to take in modern usage, it carries rather the negative sense of a “convenient” solution, not ideal but unavoidable in the circumstances.³ Furthermore, for Mo-ho-yen “mundane reality” does not refer to the whole realm of human experience in general, but only to the life and perspective of those who do not practice zazen. Conversely, “supreme reality” refers to the “nonconceptual and nonperceptive” insight gained through zazen. In this sense, it corresponds to the second of the three defining characteristics of Indian Buddhism enumerated above, in that it is not an experience of sensory perception. Even though this supreme reality is said to be a priori in transcending sensory perception, it can be inferred through verbal negation and therefore cannot simply be dismissed as “transcending verbal expression.” Instead, one should accept insight into supreme reality as an aid on the road to bodhi-wisdom.

Mo-ho-yen goes on to claim not only that zazen is distinct from the prajna and dhyana of the six perfections, but also that the practice of the six perfections is no more than an expedient way for those of inferior capabilities. Those blessed with superior capabilities, in contrast, should practice “nonconceptual and nonperceptive” zazen and have no cause for recourse to the practice of the six perfections. In this context he distinguishes four types of “the six perfections,” the highest of which he calls “the internal six perfections” (内六波羅蜜):

For those who have achieved nonconceptuality and nonperceptivity, the six perfections will naturally be perfected [internally]. For those who have not, [the inferior forms of] the six perfections should still be practiced, even though they cannot expect to attain fruitful rewards [such as the highest attainment of Buddhahood] in this way. [80b]

Mo-ho-yen does not view the six perfections either as a means of advancing toward Buddhahood or as an irreplaceable practice for attaining bodhi, but as a kind of capacity that one either has or does not have.

At the same time, even though Mo-ho-yen claims that individuals vary in their native abilities, he still wants to insist that all human beings are originally endowed with an innate “wisdom of the all-knower” (一切知者の智) that will manifest itself spontaneously in anyone who has managed to get rid of delusions through the zealous discipline of non-

conceptual and nonperceptive zazen. Naturally, the “wisdom” thus manifest is understood as the ability to comprehend the ultimate truth, and the six perfections are seen as its attributes. In his words:

The six perfections are practiced in order to achieve *prajñāpāramitā*. But if the perfection of wisdom (*jñāna-pāramitā*) is achieved [in the achievement of nonconceptual and nonperceptive zazen], then the other five perfections [as well as *prajñāpāramitā*] are achieved as well, even without practicing them as such. [81b]

Mo-ho-yen thus ignores the practice of various means for advancing on the path to Buddhahood, including the practice of the six perfections. Instead, he teaches that it is enough to seek one’s own liberation through the practice of nonconceptual and nonperceptive zazen, without realizing that to do so is a form of self-attachment.

Mo-ho-yen’s response to the question of how quickly one can realize liberation through the practice of zazen rings naive:

According to the *Laṅkāvatāra Sutra* and the *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā Sutra*, those who are liberated from all conceptual thinking are called Buddhas. Different people have different capacities, some sharper, some duller, but if one cultivates this [nonconceptual and nonperceptive zazen], delusions and such tendencies will vanish and liberation will be attained. [80b–81a]

Actually the *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā Sutra* does not refer to “liberation” at all, but to bodhi, and this in the context of warning against the tendency to substantialize the referents of verbal expression because this leads to self-attachment in the minds of ordinary, ignorant people.⁴ The sutra dismissed such an attitude as not belonging to the realm of the Buddha. This does not mean, of course, that as a living organism the Buddha did not have a working consciousness. Indeed, as Kamalaśīla observes in his explanation of “the confirmation of truth” (*pratyavekṣa*),⁵ it is impossible for a living organism to realize a “nonconceptual and nonperceptive” mind, even within zazen.

In the third section of the *Bhāvanākrama*, Kamalaśīla criticizes this Zen-like attitude of ignoring the practice of the six perfections:

Some, although they are no longer in the cycle of birth and death, are still detached from great compassion and do not practice perfections like giving to other sentient beings. Their only concern is with controlling and conquering themselves. Lacking [altruistic] means (*upāya*), they

lapse into the wisdom of the *śrāvaka* or *pratyekabuddha*. [sDe dge 3917, f. 60b; Peking 5312, f 66a]

The phrase “cycle of birth and death” refers here to the general phenomenal world of mundane human experience. In Mahayana Buddhism one is required to achieve both the perfection of wisdom (*prajñā-pāramitā*) as well as the other five perfections within this mundane world in order to fulfill the requirements for advancing toward Buddhahood. Without the endowment of altruistic virtue, supreme wisdom (*anuttara-samyaksaṃbodhi*) cannot be realized. One does not arrive at an attitude of living a selfless, compassionate life merely by recognizing the “nonsubstantiality of all phenomenon.”

It is precisely this ideal that is all too often passed over in Japanese Buddhism. The goal of “perfect extinction of substantial attachment to donor, recipient, and alms through [the act of] giving” 三輪清淨の布施 is not a major element in the “ideal of practice” found in Japanese Buddhism.

The dismissal of self-conquest as the *bodhi* of a *śrāvaka* or *pratyekabuddha* is an example of the way Mahayana Buddhism criticized “Hinayana” Buddhism for reverting to the religious ideals of indigenous Indian religions that seek “liberation” rather than *bodhi*. Mo-ho-yen’s fondness for the term “liberation” shows that he was unaware of the problems with his teachings.

Hinayana Buddhism taught that people tend to arouse an erroneous attachment to personal existence if they think of it as something unchanging and eternal. The reality of living individuals is rather “the absence of self” and attachment to such an unchanging personal substance is referred to technically as “the obstacle of passionate afflictions” (*kleśāvaraṇa*). The goal, therefore, was to overcome the obstacle of “passionate afflictions” and liberate oneself from attachment to the self. Unfortunately, this tended to promote the idea that the material elements that make up the physical human body do have substantial existence. From the Mahayana perspective this is, of course, an error, one that later Buddhists would dub “the obstacle of [mistaken] knowledge” (*jñeyāvaraṇa*).

We find an example of this erroneous way of thinking already in verses 756 and 757 of the *Suttanipāta*, where it is referred to as the deluded conceptualization of an eternal substance behind “name and form” (representing mental and physical existences) that causes an emotional and willful attachment to the self. This shows a decided lack of insight into what the Buddha taught. Reducing the meaning of “name and

form” to merely “individual [independent] existence” as the cause of “the obstacle of passionate afflictions” represents a major departure in the history of Buddhism.⁷ As a result, early schools of Buddhism in India became attached to the idea of the existence of phenomenal dharmas even while touting the transiency of all things. Eventually this led to the Sautrāntika school’s theory of “momentary extinction” (*kṣaṇa-bhaṅga*).⁸ In contrast, the *Prajñāpāramitā* sutras (for example, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā Sutra*) reject all attempts to substantialize phenomenal entities, even the idea of ever-changing surface traits (*lakṣaṇa*). Mention of a “lapse into the wisdom of the sravaka or pratyekabuddha” is intended as a criticism against the tendency to seek “liberation” for oneself.

As social beings, people rely on words, perceptions, and inferences. Phenomena are made into abstract concepts, that is, they are given names or simple forms in order to be remembered and to allow for intellectual classification and manipulation. In the course of this process of “understanding,” the impermanent, ever-changing nature of the original phenomena gets lost. The temporal aspect is glossed over by words and forms, with the result that the reality behind them comes to be conceived of as unchanging and substantial. Once it has arrived at this way of thinking, the mind easily becomes attached to the supposed substantial referents, and develops an emotional and volitional relationship between them and its own supposed substantial reality. This, the Buddha taught, is the misconception that lies at the root of all suffering in the world. By classifying abstractions of “name and form” and then imagining them as substantial entities, consciousness can only lead to the wrong course of action, or what later Buddhists would call “the obstacle of [mistaken] knowledge.”

As we will explain later when we come to the third characteristic of Indian Buddhism, the correct perception of the world and its phenomena is a matter of the greatest importance in Buddhism. There is nothing in its teachings to suggest detachment from others or indifference towards their lives. On the contrary, one cannot live independently and at the same time claim to understand Buddhism. The “obstacle of [mistaken] knowledge” is removed only by purifying one’s conceptual understanding for the sake of serving others. It is only *within* the reality of human society that one can awaken to the idea of bodhi-wisdom and realize it concretely in compassion. Nirvana means release from attachment to oneself, and this means giving oneself over to the service of others in order to lead them to the same path. This “giving” is none other than the practice of the six perfections.

This is also the true meaning of “benefiting the world” (*genze riyaku*),⁹ which Dōgen captures in the injunction to “First save others before you attempt to save yourself.”¹⁰ Clearly there is no question of forsaking human society in order to pursue peace of mind on some secluded mountain or deep in the recesses of a forest. To be sure, one should strive not to be controlled by others or absorbed into one’s surroundings, but what is the point of struggling for self-control? Even if I achieve a kind of “liberation” or “freedom from the bonds of attachment,” as long as I continue to live only for myself I have yet to overcome the “obstacle of [mistaken] knowledge.”

Bhavya, one of the patriarchs of the Madhyamika school of Mahayana Buddhism, says in his *Tarkajvālā* that “this [Hinayana] way serves only to remove the obstacle of passionate afflictions, but does nothing for the obstacle of [mistaken] knowledge.” It is not that the Buddha taught distinct paths for removing these two distinct obstacles. Both derive from a common misunderstanding rooted in the native tendencies of consciousness itself. The Buddha’s conviction of the truth of emptiness was what allowed him to sever the tendency toward passionate afflictions and mistaken attitudes at the roots.¹¹ In other words, unshakable insight into an a priori, “empty” flow of causal relationships—that is, into the nonsubstantiality of phenomena—of itself disengages one from the “obstacle of passionate afflictions.” In this connection Śāntarakṣita writes:

Once one has seen through the nonsubstantiality of phenomena, one will become accustomed to thinking in terms of the lack of independent existence (*svabhāva*), and without even realizing it will abandon the delusions that arise from passionate afflictions. [v. 83; sDe dge 3885, f. 76b; Peking 5285, f. 75b]

Most Japanese dictionaries of Buddhism fall into the irresponsible habit of treating “liberation” and “bodhi” as synonymous. But attaining bodhi is not to be confused with the secluded refinement of egoism that goes by the name of “liberation.” It involves overcoming the “obstacle of [mistaken] knowledge,” the freedom from self-attachment, and the lived practice of giving oneself in service to others.

BODHI IS NOT SATORI

The second distinguishing mark of Indian Buddhism is the teaching that bodhi-wisdom is not an experience of sensory perception like satori, but

refers to the achievement of a distinctive existential realm and its accompanying state of latent consciousness.

On the basis of his understanding of the *Vajracchedikā-prajñā-pāramitā Sutra*, Mo-ho-yen taught that the “wisdom of the all-knower” latent in all of us comes to light in the practice of nonconceptual and nonperceptive meditation. He claims that the Dharma Body (*dharmakāya*) itself is revealed in this way. In short, the wisdom made manifest in *zazen* is none other than an insight into the nature of the supreme truth. As we saw earlier, since the claim is that nonconceptual and nonperceptive *zazen* is aimed finally at the supreme truth, it is beside the point to argue whether the six perfections and the other virtues are necessary or not for those who have the capacity to practice. Whatever one may think of such a claim, it is clear at least that for Mo-ho-yen *zazen* involved an existential grasp of or insight into supreme truth (勝義の把握).

Despite the obvious differences between the teaching of Mo-ho-yen and that of other Chinese Ch’an masters, this insistence on the experience of “*satori*” is shared in common. The recorded sayings of the Ch’an masters recount numerous incidents of a seemingly meaningless action leading to an insight or serving as a catalyst for *satori* that suddenly bursts into the experience of a “great awakening” (大悟). These experiences were also in fashion in Tibet from around the tenth century. The “supreme Yoga tantra” line of lay esoteric Buddhism—at first dismissed as “a demonic religion” (悪魔の宗教)—extrapolated from the experience of sexual ecstasy to develop a method for reaching a realm “beyond thoughts and conceptions” (無念無想). The completion of this process, said to give one access to the ultimate meaning of emptiness, was called “the ultimate stage” (*niṣpannākrama*). The idea was based on indigenous Indian religious practices masquerading as Buddhism and riding roughshod over the careful distinction between the two truths (*saṃvṛti-satya* and *paramārtha-satya*). That is, in dismissing worldly truth out of hand as incommensurate with supreme truth, it overlooked the inviolable aspects of worldly truth and mistook it for simple nothingness.

This idea of an “existential grasp of the supreme truth” is common also to the Yoga school, one of the six traditional philosophical schools of India, and was referred to variously as “the mystical intuition [or ‘direct insight’] of the yogin.” Although even Indian Buddhists such as the famous logician Dharmakīrti acknowledged such experience,¹² Śāntarakṣita rejected it outright. The opening verses to his *Madhyamakālam-*

kāra deny independent substance in any worldly phenomenon; since everything appears as a perceived result from the undercurrent of causal relationships, there is nothing that abides eternally. This leads him to attack “the mystical intuition of the yogin” head-on in the third verse:

Some Buddhists say things like, “The object of perception that arises through the cultivation [of yoga] does not correspond to the activity of the phenomenal world [of composed dharmas]. It is rather a perception of the abstract and transphenomenal [uncomposed dharmas], which has nothing to do with the activities of a consciousness that aims at objectifying the self. Insofar as this object constitutes knowledge of the truth, it exists a priori [as the supreme truth].”

If this were indeed the case, [this object of perception] would not be contradicted by even a single, independent substance. But it is in fact contradicted, because: “What is known from perceptions arising through the cultivation [of yoga] cannot be identified as unconditioned dharmas, because the knowledge is closely bound up with [perceptions] that are only experienced gradually.” [verse 3; sDe dge 3885, f. 57b; Peking 5285, f. 53a–b]

In arguing forcefully against this position, Śāntarakṣita realizes that the basic question is not about knowing supreme truth, but about how ideas as such arise through feelings and intentions. His reasoning and conclusions are simple and clear. Not even a yogin can directly experience an a priori state of the truth. For insofar as that a priori state is the single and eternal state of existence of an “uncomposed dharma,” it cannot be an object of perception accessible to a human consciousness that is not and cannot itself be eternal.

In another passage, Śāntarakṣita argues similarly against the existential grasp of “the supreme truth”:

[The supreme truth] cannot be known. From the beginningless beginning [our latent consciousness] has been thoroughly dominated by the tendency to misperceive “existences” as lying within the continuity [of living organisms]. It is therefore impossible for living beings to actually know [supreme truth itself]. [verse 74; sDe dge 3885, f. 74b; Peking 5285, f. 73a]

Not only is it impossible to grasp experientially the reality of an a priori “supreme truth” on logical grounds, it is impossible to do so insofar as one is a living organism. The opening section of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā Sutra* explains clearly that not even a bodhisattva who

has perfected the perfection of wisdom has access to a conscious experience of satori:

World-Honored One: The bodhisattva practices the perfection of wisdom. But no matter what one gains from the cultivation of the perfection of wisdom, one must not take pride at having attained the mind of bodhi. And why must one train this way? Because this mind [of bodhi] is not that kind of mind [that is taken as substantial]. By nature it is pure as light. [sDe dge 12, f 3a; Peking 734, f. 3a; P. L. Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Darbhanga, 1960), p. 3]

The passage focuses on the nature of consciousness that arises in the form of feelings and intentions. “Training” here refers to changing the habits of latent consciousness in order to complete the formation of convictions coincident with the facts. Attainment of the perfection of wisdom assumes that one has already perfected the other five perfections. At that point, one is in tune with a priori reality and as such does not cling to the self or to objects of perception. Nor, of course, is the “mind of bodhi-wisdom” a conscious object of attachment. The true Buddhist is one who has become “accustomed” to this kind of conviction. If one is conscious of having attained a mind of bodhi-wisdom, this is rather a sign that one has *not* perfected the latent consciousness of the perfection of wisdom or attained supreme wisdom. The reference to the bodhi-mind as “by nature pure as light” means, as the sutra itself explains, that the mind is not an object possessed of characteristics and changes that can be grasped a priori, nor does it contain in itself any substantial objects on which it performs mental differentiations.

In short, one attains supreme wisdom through the cultivation of the perfection of wisdom on the one hand, and through the exercise of virtue and altruistic practices on the other. Insofar as one’s mind is permanently attuned to the undercurrent of causal relationships, then even in perceiving the appearances of the phenomenal world, one will not get bogged down in extraneous distinctions concerning those appearances or cudgel one’s brain over ideas arising from feelings and intentions.

From such a standpoint, the things that the yogins claim to have perceived in “mystical intuition” are merely “things” perceived in the consciousness of the yogin without any relation at all to the supreme wisdom of the mind of bodhi.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GIVING AND COMPASSION

The third defining trait of Indian Buddhism is the praxis of the first two. This practice is grounded in the relation of the “two truths,” namely the truth of “worldly” reality (the world as a perceived phenomenon) and the truth of “supreme” meaning (the world as it is prior to our experience of it, the causal basis of our perceptions).

In giving verbal expression to our perceptual impressions, the human tendency is to create abstractions that dispense with the temporal element. In the *Suttanipāta*, the world of experience is presented as a continuous flow of illusions that can neither be stopped nor grasped, a stream of spatial existences that the imagination “pauses” in order to apply verbal conceptions to it.¹³ In its effort to decide how the mind *should* work, Buddhist epistemology rejects verbal conceptualizations that see real objects as spatial existences extracted from their temporal context. All such ideation is seen as a “provisional construct” erected in the service of verbal expression. Indeed “space” and “time” themselves are seen as no more than makeshift “scaffolding” for verbal expression, not the form of a priori existence itself.

To paraphrase this idea in modern scientific terminology, let us say that one person is speaking and another is listening to what is said. What is being relayed to the listener is not in fact the speaker’s voice as such but only sound waves advancing in the air that fills the space between them. The flow of the sound waves represents the a priori form of the “voice” that the listener actually hears. These waves are associated with a certain lapse of time, reassembled in the physical organs of the ear, perceived and interpreted as the voice of the speaker, and recognized as forming a string of words. A series of similar experiences are “remembered” and crystallize to form a false pivot around which the illusion begins to turn that I, as the subject of those experiences and as an imaginary pivot, am an objective, unchanging reality. In fact, however, the subject of these experiences is no more than a reference point for provisionally constructing images of our own experience. Furthermore, the idea of a time lapse (the past immediately preceding “now”) makes it possible for us to speak of “the present time.” But in fact the phenomenal world does not actually “pause” at all or come to a halt in the moment we determine to be this “present time.”¹⁴

In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* and in the second chapter of Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*,¹⁵ the real “now” that domi-

nates the phenomenal world is explained as a constant flow from past to future without pause and without lapse. In such a “now” there is no place for concrete sound waves to form. Rather, the speaker forms a series of “nows” that provides momentum to a flow of causal relationships, enabling these causal relationships to form in the present time and in the mind of the listener a “voice.”

In Buddhist terminology, the a priori condition of this flow of “nows” is called “supreme reality”; the momentum of the undercurrent of causal relationships is called “the flow of [latent] conditions” (*pratītya-samutpāda*); and the fact that there is nothing substantial in this process to be grasped is what is called “emptiness.” In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā Sutra* emptiness is referred to as the “suchlike nature” (如是性) of reality; the fourteenth and fifteenth chapters speak of “this aspect” (*ayaṃ dharmo*).¹⁶ These terms in turn recall the use of the term “that” (*tato tam, tam tasya*) as used in verse 757 of the *Suttanipāta*.

The point is that whatever one experiences—that is, anything whatsoever that serves as a cause for perception—belongs to a never-ending flow of causal relationships that cannot be grasped in the suspended animation of a “now.” Perceived experience is described in the *Suttanipāta* as ever-changing “illusion” (*mosadhammaṃ*). In the Madhyamika school it is occasionally depicted as a “mirage” or “apparition.”

In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and the works of Nāgārjuna such expressions are intended basically to reject the “momentary extinction” (*kṣaṇa-bhaṅga*) doctrine of the Sautrāntika school. The sutra explains:

All the Buddhas, World-Honored Ones, did not pass on their power (**pariṇāma*) to use form (verbal expressions) directly as a medium (to lead to supreme wisdom), because in actuality things that are past have already been consumed, extinguished, cut off [from the present], and changed; and things that are to come [in the future] have not yet appeared. In order to appear “now” [with no stopping and with no lapse of time] things cannot be objectified as a spatial stillness [in perception], and things that cannot be objectified cannot have any form as external objects. [sDe dge 12, f. 84b; Peking 734, f 90b; Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, p. 76; T No. 228, 8.610a–b]

The “four pairs of negations” of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* are understood in Chinese Buddhism in terms of the “eight negations” of “neither perishing nor arising, neither annihilated nor eternal, neither self-identical nor variant, neither coming nor going.”¹⁷ I find this interpretation mis-

taken because it contradicts the authoritative explanation of *pratītya-samutpāda* in the *sGra-sbyor bam po gnyis pa*.¹⁸

The first pair of negations, “neither perishing nor arising,” points to the subjective transiency of objects as marked by the end and beginning of two “momentary extinctions.” Understanding the changing flow of things in these terms—namely, as a new “momentary extinction” arising after another “momentary extinction” has passed away—does not allow for any flow of a mediating “now,” and the momentum of the undercurrent of causal relationships that lead a thing from one phase of transformation to another is lost. This pair of negations rather aims at denying substantive transformation by pointing to the changing flow of a transiency that does not entail extinction. In other words, a connection is made between “change that does not involve the extinction of a substantive form” to “change that does not involve the arising of a substantive form.” Similarly, the next pair of negations concerning the transient flow of things (“neither annihilated nor eternal”) also aims at negating before and after as two distinct stages in order to deny the reality of a single, two-phased substance (“neither self-identical nor variant”) to be grasped.

The final pair of negations, “neither coming nor going,” locates the state of objects that are perceived as belonging to the flow of “now.” If a substantial form from the past were in fact manifest in our perception, and then passed away, this would entail the existence of substances that survive in the transition from the past through the present to the future in order to become the objects of our perception. As I noted earlier in introducing Śāntarakṣita’s rejection of the yogin’s mystical intuition, Buddhist teachings do not allow for an eternal substantive object that can become the object of perception. But if this interpretation is also to be rejected, what actually takes place in the flow of what we call “now”?

It is not possible for something that does not exist in the past to have a “form” or “characteristic” that appears out of the past and to be perceived “now.” Nor is it possible for some “form” or “characteristic” to pass away “now” into a future that does not yet exist. The only option that remains is to posit a “now” of flowing perceptions that neither involves forms coming from the past nor forms passing away into the future. In other words, even if one grants an object the latent potential to appear, its appearance does not appear in the “now” as such. If there can be no break in the flow, neither can there be any perception of a distinction between the two states of existence that words like “before” and

“after” suggest. Nor is there any substantial reality that fuses the two states into a harmonious unity. In this way, the perceptual transiency that is denied to objects is also applied to the subject.

This reading of the four negations is consistent with the explanation in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā* of how the mind works. There it is said that the present “now” does not involve pauses or temporal gaps; nor does it allow for the “momentary extinction” of substances. Such a position coincides with the denial of the reality of “marks” according to which “there is no ‘change’ [through the extinction of marks as objective realities], and no “perception” [through the distinction of marks as subjective functions].”¹⁹ This is not to say, of course, that there exists some single unchanging, substantive reality that serves as the subject of perception. All of this is clearly spelled out in the *Madhyamakālamkāra*.

Hardly any of the later Mādhyamikan scholars accepted explanations based on the idea of an a priori being. Bhavya, like those of the Sautrāntika school, taught that the causes of perception are reflected, just as they are, in the forms in which they are perceived. He could not make any sense of the idea of an a priori “supreme truth” that cannot be experienced “now,” but instead developed his own explanation of “supreme truth” as that which is experienced by a noble sage. Failing to understand the idea of a flow between two “momentary extinctions” as an expression of transiency, Candrakīrti took it to refer to a rejection of the doctrine of the nonreversibility of the flow of time. Focusing his attention on rejecting verbal expressions about time as mutually exclusive (suggestive of the *apoha* theory), he became mired in idealistic, often fraudulent, interpretations of mutual relationships.²⁰

Only Śāntarakṣita seems to come close to a correct understanding, though there are problems with his interpretations as well. Śāntarakṣita taught that the “illusion” of motion or pause that shows up in our perceptual experience can be accounted for in terms of our experience of the passing of the immediate past as “the present.” He argues that the causes and effects of perception are not the same. He uses the analogy of a “ring of fire” to illustrate the illusion of mistaking what is moving for something standing still, and of “a needle piercing the stem of a rose” to illustrate the illusion of mistaking perceptual vagueness for movement. Furthermore, he denied that space is an a priori and uncomposed dharma. For him space is not a conceptual “nothingness” but an experiential state that occurs through “the present.” The a priori causes of a phenomenon

cannot be traced to a conceptual “nothingness” simply because it is denied spatial objectivity. Since the idea of “being” was equally unsuited to provide a priori causality for phenomena, he focused his attention on the notion of “extreme minuteness” (極微) found in the *Viṃśatikāvijñaptimātratāsiddhi* and developed his famous theory of “proof without recourse to unity [of infinitesimal reality] and plurality” (*ekāneka-svabhāvavyatireka*, 離一多性証明).²¹

Unfortunately, the idea of “extreme minuteness” amounted to a conceptual “nothingness,” which meant that the denial of conceptual “being” in Śāntarakṣita’s proof entailed a reversion to the very idea of “nothingness” he had himself rejected. In giving examples to illustrate “emptiness” Śāntarakṣita deliberately avoided analogies such as “a flower in space” and “the horns of a rabbit” traditionally employed to distinguish it from “nothingness.” Instead he drew on examples like “the image in a mirror” or “the (coreless) trunk of a banana tree,” even though they were not suited to his method of “proof without recourse to unity and plurality.”

“Extreme minuteness” does not refer to spatial characteristics. It is a conceptualized limit-condition referring to the “zero time” at the border of the past and the future, an abstract halt in the flow of the current of causal relationships that makes up the temporal “now.” By analyzing time and space as provisional constructs, extreme minuteness amounts to an unwitting denial of both time and space, with the result that the idea of “composed dharmas”—the only thing Śāntarakṣita himself saw as worthy of attention—becomes unsustainable.²² In the end his explanation fails to account for the fact that the causal relations that enable perception must somehow involve a time and space that does not “stop,” even if there is no way to grasp this condition perceptually.

As we have seen, the a priori state of the phenomenal world can be inferred, and on the basis of this inference treated as logical knowledge, by employing the negative function of verbal expression according to which words are understood as having provisional meaning. Accordingly, the Ch’an characterization of ultimate meaning as something “not founded on words and transmitted outside the scriptures” is totally erroneous.

The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā Sutra* cited above acknowledges that ultimate truth can be inferred as knowledge, but warns that this knowledge alone is incapable of prompting the human heart away from the self-centered emotions and willfulness that dominate human behavior,

and guiding it towards bodhi-wisdom. In this way, it does not deny the possibility of verbal expression as an intellectual means of transmitting knowledge, but at the same time it warns us that we must be aware of its limits. The passage cited earlier continues:

Even if you only know it [a priori reality] through forms [or negative verbal expression], until you have pondered it in your heart, it cannot turn you around to the attainment of supreme wisdom. At the same time, there is no way to ponder what you do not know. If you do not remember it, or if it does not form part of your latent consciousness, then it is likewise impossible for you to be turned around to the attainment of supreme wisdom. If, however, you go beyond the mere [intellectual] knowledge of the forms [or verbal expressions] and ponder it in your heart, both you and the other bodhisattvas will profit from the good roots [of altruistic activity] and arrive at supreme wisdom. [sDe dge 12, f. 84b; Peking 734, f 90b; Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, p. 76; T No. 228, 8.610a–b]

This passage covers virtually everything contained in the third characteristic of Indian Buddhism. The first basic step is to have knowledge of the supreme truth. But it is not enough just to have knowledge; one must ponder it internally. In doing so, if one constantly avoids substantialist thinking, the “good roots” that are accumulated through one’s own altruistic activity as well as that of all who seek the Buddhist way will advance the cause of attaining to the realm of bodhi-wisdom.

To cultivate firm intellectual convictions regarding the supreme truth, and thus to overcome ordinary human substantialist thinking, is what Kamalaśīla calls “the confirmation of the truth” (*bhūta-pratyavekṣā*).²³ It is the perfection of wisdom:

Without a correct confirmation of [a priori] truth, how can those who practice dhyana replace mental habits of attachment to concrete existence that they have had since beginningless time with [a mental attitude of] nondiscrimination? They claim that it is possible to take a non-conceptual (*dran pa med pa*) and nonconscious (*yid la mi byed pa*) attitude toward all phenomena, but this does not stand to reason. Without confirming the *truth* correctly, one cannot take a nonconceptual or non-conscious attitude toward all the dharmas that one has already experienced [as something substantial] in one’s mind. If one decides not to conceptualize or to become conscious of these dharmas, in the very act of choosing against conceptualization or consciousness one [becomes

mentally attached to these dharmas and] actually calls them up to mind and consciousness....

Thus there is no other way to rid oneself of [substantive] conceptualizations and [substantive] consciousness than to confirm the *truth*. Even should one reach a state free of all conceptualization and consciousness, as long as there has been no confirmation of the *truth*, how can one act in accordance with [the conviction concerning] the lack of self-being in dharmas? Even if one should fathom [intellectually] the emptiness or lack of self-being in dharmas, as long as there is no confirmation of the *truth*, the mind will not be fully convinced of this emptiness. Without a firm conviction regarding emptiness, one cannot remove all the obstacles that the passions put in the way....

On the supposition that one's ability to conceptualize dharmas is not impaired, or that one is not an outright imbecile, how can one hope to reach a state of nonconceptualization and nonconsciousness without a correct confirmation of the *truth*? And [even if we grant that such a state were possible,] it could not be said that one has [spiritually] achieved nonconceptualization and nonconsciousness if the one who has attained it is physiologically a conscious, conceptualizing, embodied individual....

It is through this [confirmation of the *truth*] that people can sever all attachments to substantial existence produced by illusory perceptual constructions, and then attain nondiscriminative wisdom. This attainment in turn involves the latent conviction of emptiness that breaks the bonds of evil misunderstandings. Through means (*upāya*) and the perfection of wisdom, one is able to act rightly, in accord with mundane truth and supreme truth. Inasmuch as this implies that one has attained wisdom beyond the obstacle of [mistaken] knowledge (*jñeyāvaraṇa*), it also means that one is able to act in accord with all the dharmas of a Buddha. Conversely, if one has not this confirmation of the *truth*, one cannot call upon the right and fundamental bodhi-wisdom, nor can one [even] displace the obstacles of passionate afflictions (*klesāvaraṇa*). [sDe dge 3917, ff. 62a–63a; Peking 5312, ff. 67a–68b]

In verse 75 of the *Madhyamakālaṃkāra*, Śāntarakṣita explains this idea, though without actually using the term “confirmation of the *truth*”:

[By deepening one's convictions concerning what can be correctly learned about the a priori flow of causal relationships,] if the consciousness that is awakened by this conviction is sustained sympathetically, the latent convictions can avoid the [error of] substantialistic verbal expression. Masters of yoga enter a state of concentration (*samādhi*) that arouses in them a sympathetic conviction of the substantial equality [or a priori

state] of all phenomena, and this in turn promotes a state of wisdom unblemished by discriminating thought. Until such time as they achieve this state, they cannot sustain a latent awareness that the internal and external existences that form the basis of life are, like the trunk of a banana tree, without a [substantialist] core. But once this wisdom is perfected in them, there are no seeds [for consciousness] to grow in latent consciousness and produce the idea of phenomena as substantial essences (*thams cad—thugs su chud de*). [sDe dge 3885, f. 74b; Peking 5285, f. 73a6–8]²⁴

This passage calls to mind what Dōgen has to say in citing the words of Yakusan Gudō that “in order to think about the nature of unthinkable-ness (不思量底), one must use nonthinking (非思量).”²⁵ If “thinking” (思量) here refers to conscious feelings and volitions that are to be distinguished from analysis (考究) based on knowledge, then “unthinkableness” obviously refers to the a priori flow of causal relationships (*pratītya-samutpāda*) and the lack of independent existence (*svabhāva*). Thinking thus comes to refer to forming convictions about the undercurrent of causal relationships and making these convictions habitual. Gudō’s phrase “one must use nonthinking” corresponds to the doctrine of Śāntaraṣita just cited regarding the state of wisdom “unblemished by discriminating thought” and yet convinced of the substantial equality of all things, a state that inhibits the idea from taking root in latent consciousness that phenomena are substantial essences. This is certainly a far cry from the “unconditionedness” (無為) or “satori attainment” (待悟) of zazen.

If I am able to understand the nature of supreme truth correctly, and then cultivate a habitual latent awareness of this conviction, this puts me in a position to break free of the delusional attachments of my former latent consciousness, which saw the self and external objects as substantial entities. At the same time, accumulating the effects of good deeds and practices holds out as a reward the attainment of bodhi-wisdom, and with it a latent consciousness that no longer clings to any substantial entities. In short, it is through the practice of the perfections (the various means of good deeds, including the perfection of wisdom) that I am able to attain the bodhi-wisdom of which Kamalaśīla speaks.

The phenomenal world arises from the undercurrent of causal relationships. There is no denying the fact that nothing appears without a basis in some a priori cause and condition. But to leap from there to the conclusion that these illusory appearances are substantial entities and then

to develop an attachment to them is a form of self-delusion produced by the living and perceiving body. Even from the vantage point of the ultimate realm, the mundane world remains the locus of our lives and our every attempt to reach a stillpoint. The need to practice the Buddhist path in the mundane world remains the same. As Śāntarakṣita writes:

Phenomena that arise through the [perceptible] process of cause-and-effect are not to be rejected as mundane [reality]. One must not deny the process of purifying the [defiled] roots of passionate afflictions because of a confused understanding [of the discrimination between the true and mundane aspects]. (verse 84)

Elsewhere he elaborates:

This is why [Nāgārjuna] taught that inferior people who do not understand the true meaning of stillness but stop once they have heard [the Dharma] and do not go on to practice virtuous qualities, will perish. [sDe dge 3917, f. 77a; Peking 5285, f. 76a]

These remarks are actually an extension of the teaching we find in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*. Śāntarakṣita's criticism is aimed at those who think that it is enough to understand the Buddha's teaching at the level of verbal knowledge, and that there is no need to form convictions about these teachings that shape habits of belief, or to practice compassion in order to rectify the perceptions of latent consciousness. In the exercise of virtue, the attainment of the perfection of prajna-wisdom leads ahead to supreme bodhi-wisdom, that is, to the wisdom of the "all-knower" (the one who knows perfectly the flow of causal relationships). This practice is called "means to advance upward [toward Buddhahood]" (向上方便).

When one advances toward the perfection of wisdom by confirming the *truth* within oneself, the outer Buddhist practices of "advancing toward Buddhahood" (i.e., good deeds) stimulate the development of a correct latent consciousness, and one draws near to the realm of bodhi-wisdom. The main issue here, according to Śāntarakṣita, is the type of consciousness that controls one's Buddhist activities:

Therefore the perfections that are attained through the momentum (of the attachments that consider perceptions, just as they are, to be external objects) are no different from [the erroneous convictions] formed as a result of deluded attachment to mistaken ideas of self and things that belong to the self. The power [of these perfections] is weak. (verse 89)

[In contrast, the power] that accrues from the attainment [of the six perfections] in virtue of its awareness that things are *not* substantial entities is considerable and flows out of its source with ever-increasing strength, like a plant growing up out of a seed with great vigor. (verse 90) [sDe dge 3917, f. 77b–78a; Peking 5312, f. 77a–b]

This is the same point made in the *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā Sutra* regarding the injunction to “give with complete lack of attachment to donor, recipient, and alms.”²⁶ Lest there be any misunderstanding, Kamaraśīla explains the idea of “giving” as follows:

“Giving” (*dāna*) is explained in three forms [wealth, fearlessness, and Dharma] and with regard to all six perfections. It is more than mere giving [in the narrow sense]. [sDe dge 3817, f. 216a; Peking 5216, f. 224a]

Mention is also made of this “triple form” in a commentary to the *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā Sutra* attributed to Asaṅga:

Giving represents all of the six perfections. It involves [giving of] wealth, fearlessness, and the Dharma. These three correspond respectively as follows: the first [to the perfection of giving], the second [to the perfections of keeping the precepts and patience], and the third [to the perfections of diligence, dhyana, and prajna]. These are called practices without attachments. [Peking 5864, f. 1b; T. No. 1514, 25.885a10–11]

All of us rely on verbal expression to live in this mundane world, to provide ourselves with food, clothing, and shelter. It is only through the perfection of our existence as living organisms within a stable order that we can see the phenomenal world for what it is. There is no other context within which to seize the joyous opportunity of following the Buddhist teachings as they should be followed. It is well known that the six perfections make up the ideal of Buddhist practice. The Buddhist scriptures explain these six perfections in terms of three types of selfless giving that break down self-centered attachments. First, one needs to give material things to those who lack basic food, clothing, and shelter, to help those suffering from poverty and the fear of war, and so forth. Second, one needs to have patience and live a moral life (“keep the precepts”). Finally, for those who wish to guide others to the Buddhist path one needs diligence, concentration, and *prajñā* conviction.

These latter are necessary for those with the courage to seek bodhi. Śāntarakṣita refers to this as the quest for the ultimate “gift of the Dharma”:

THE CORE ELEMENTS OF INDIAN BUDDHISM

Those who seek after the heart of the Buddha's teachings need to awaken in themselves a sense of compassionate mercy with regard to all sentient beings who still cling to mistaken teachings. (verse 96) [sDe dge 3885, f. 82a; Peking 5285, f. 82b]

In order to pursue this disengagement from all self-centered attachments in the midst of the phenomenal world, the life of the recluse is out of the question. On this point Kamalaśīla says:

Even if one has the conviction of the supreme truth, there is no way to take leave of the mundane world. And because this is so, one seeks a great compassion freed of all false attachments, and intent on benefiting other sentient beings. [sDe dge 3915, f. 38a; Peking 5310, f. 41a]

The exercise of great compassion by a Buddha who has fulfilled this path is called “means to apply downward [to help other beings]” (向下方便). There can be no doubt that the ideal way of life taught by Buddhism is “the practice of perfect giving” and that this consists in the practice of the six perfections.

[*Translated by Paul L. Swanson*]