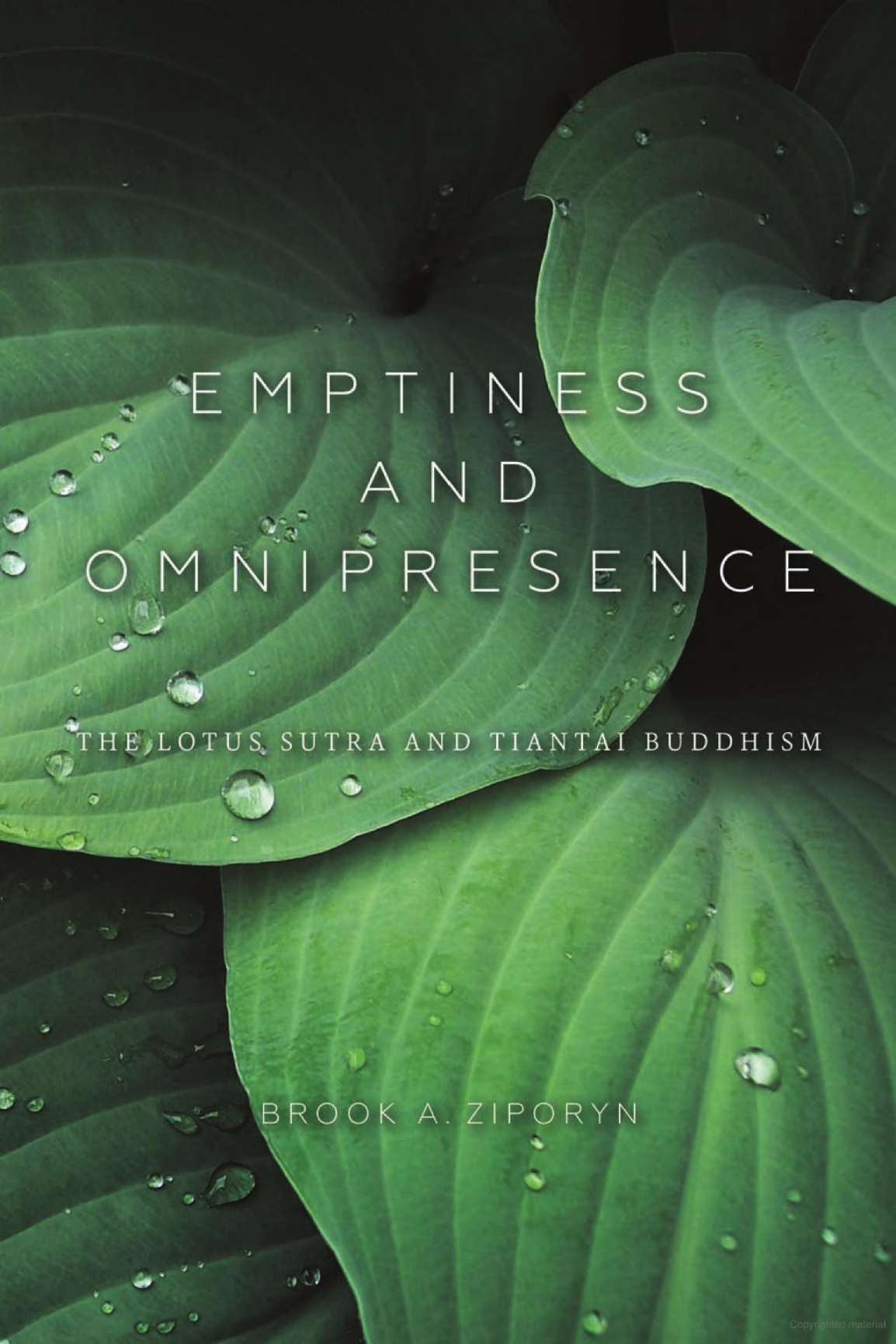

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PREFACE

CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS FINDS ITSELF in a disorienting situation. The dissolution of monolithic conceptual hegemonies that has occurred in the wake of intensified intercultural communication presents a new set of challenges, calling for a way forward that both respects and creatively develops the unwieldy diversity of seemingly incommensurate cultural systems that are now beginning to come into contact with one another. These unprecedented challenges, however, also provide unprecedented opportunities. Traditional Chinese Buddhist thought can make a claim for particularly close philosophical attention in this cultural situation in that it preserves for us the record of perhaps one of the only commensurate premodern examples of an analogous philosophical predicament. Chinese Buddhism emerged from the world-historical encounter between two deeply disparate cultural and philosophical traditions: the indigenous traditions of India (and, more generally, Indo-European cultures) and East Asian cultures.

The earliest attempt at a thoroughgoing Sinitic reworking of the Indian Buddhist tradition is found in the Tiantai school, founded in the fifth century CE, which through supreme intellectual effort forged a vocabulary with which to bring these two worlds of thought into creative dialogue, developing a synthesis that simultaneously satisfies their very dissimilar demands, thereby producing an entirely new vision of Buddhism and indeed of the human condition. In its full flowering, Tiantai creates the most rigorous theoretical edifice in all of East Asian intellectual history, using modes of argumentation and praxis that are derived squarely from Indian Buddhism but in the service of ideals and

metaphysical conclusions that are rooted deeply in the indigenous philosophical traditions. The result is a comprehensive system of thought that is utterly new, rarely understood, and, as it happens, still quite unique and unduplicated fifteen centuries later.

This book presents an interpretation of the ontology, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics of Tiantai Buddhism, as rooted in that tradition's reappropriation of general Buddhist philosophical concepts of suffering, conditionality, nonself, desire, emptiness, inherent enlightenment, and Buddha-nature, and of the way those doctrines are seen by Tiantai tradition to have been radically reconfigured by the narrative innovations of the *Lotus Sūtra* (full Sanskrit name: *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*). The distinctive ideas developed in this school of thought have not yet received attention commensurate to their potential philosophical importance in English-language scholarship. Some of my own past works have attempted to redress this underrepresentation, but have done so by pursuing a textual-based cultural-historical approach to Tiantai internecine doctrinal disputes (*Evil and/or/as the Good: Omnicentrism, Intersubjectivity, and Value Paradox in Tiantai Buddhist Thought* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000]) and an experimental exploration of potential further applications of Tiantai ideas (*Being and Ambiguity: Philosophical Experiments with Tiantai Buddhism* [Chicago: Open Court, 2004]). These two previous works seem to have presented some difficulty to many readers, largely due to their level of detail and specificity, their rather close mirroring of the not very user-friendly commentarial forms of argumentation found in classical Tiantai works in Chinese, and the faithful reproduction of the deliberately counterintuitive and sometimes byzantine doctrinal formulations found in those traditional texts. The present work, in contrast, is meant to present the key Tiantai ideas and their antecedents in more direct and less mediated terms, in a way that will be comprehensible to educated contemporary philosophical readers of all backgrounds. The work spells out the steps of the arguments behind the basic premises of Buddhist thought and how these both underpin and are undermined by the revolutionary Mahāyāna concepts of Emptiness, Two Truths, *upāya*, bodhisattvahood, Buddha-nature, and inherent enlightenment. In language that is meant to be at once nontech-

nical and yet maximally lucid, dialectically rigorous and yet intuitively accessible, philosophically precise and yet implicatively expansive, the book is an attempt to reframe the distinctive insights of that tradition so as to bring out the radical resonances these ideas have for central issues of contemporary philosophical reflection and dialogue.

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MANY THANKS ARE DUE TO A LONG LIST OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE for one reason or another found themselves reading and commenting on various versions of this manuscript, in whole or in part, over the years: first of all to my students, who admittedly had no choice, but who consistently rose to the occasion, alerting me to crucial conceptual and rhetorical nodal points as much with their revelatory left-field perplexities as with their equally expansive left-turn applications; and also to devoted and attentive outside readers like Koichiro Yoshida, Priya Nelson, and Malcolm Pearce, and most recently my brother, Evan Ziporyn. Their responses and queries have brought immeasurably greater clarity and depth to both the contents and the presentation of the ideas of this work, both reining me in and goading me open. Thanks are also due to the Mellon Foundation for its generous support toward the completion of this project.

EMPTINESS AND OMNIPRESENCE

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK PRESENTS CERTAIN IDEAS ABOUT SUFFERING AND liberation from suffering—about human well-being—developed in a distinctive tradition of Chinese Buddhism known as the Tiantai school. In particular, I draw from the philosophical ideas developed from the sixth to eleventh centuries by this school as expounded in the writings of its three most representative figures: Tiantai Zhiyi (538–597), Jingxi Zhanran (711–782), and Siming Zhili (960–1028). It should be noted at the outset that many people, even those who are used to the complexities of Buddhist thinking and its sometimes surprising paradoxes, tend to find Tiantai claims wildly perplexing, contradictory, even shocking. This is because the key ideas of Tiantai Buddhism seem at first to be wildly at odds not only with common sense but also with sanity, religion, ethical life—indeed, even with the goals and orientations of Buddhism itself.

Tiantai philosophy asserts emphatically that Buddhahood inherently includes every form of evil, that these evils can never be destroyed, and that they do not need to be destroyed ("The evil inherent in the Buddha-nature," "Buddhahood does not cut off evil"[1]). It tells us that each experience we have includes not only itself but also all other experiences of all other sentient beings at all times, as viewed in all possible ways ("*yiniansanqian* 一念三千, The Presence of All Three Thousand Aspects of Existence as Each Moment of Experience"[2]). So our joy also includes sorrow, our sorrow also includes joy; our evil includes good, our good includes evil; our delusion includes enlightenment, our enlightenment includes delusion. And yet these are not all melted into an undifferentiated oneness; on the contrary, we are told, "The more separated they

are, the more unified they are,"[3] and vice versa. Tiantai philosophy tells us that every fleeting moment of experience of any sentient being persists eternally through all time, pervades all space, and is experienced constantly by all other sentient beings. Each of these fleeting moments of our experience is itself the ultimate source from which all reality is constantly emerging and is also the goal toward which all beings strive. Tiantai philosophy tells us that all theories and viewpoints are true and yet *also* that all of them are false. It tells us that the complete practice of any doctrine, even that of a devil, is the complete practice of Buddhism and that the complete practice of Buddhism is the complete practice of devils. And it tells us that the best way to overcome our own suffering, delusion, and evil is to dwell more deeply within them, that dwelling within them is itself a way of being liberated from them, that the deeper we dwell in them, the freer of them we become.

These doctrines seem to be crazy paradoxes, flying in the face of the most basic and universal aim of all Buddhist thought and practice: purification of the mind and liberation from suffering. They are doctrines that have puzzled not only casual listeners but even many people with an extensive knowledge of Buddhism. As noted, many have found past academic attempts to elucidate these ideas, whether in a strictly Buddhological or a comparative philosophical context, prohibitively difficult and confusing. On the other hand, over the past years I have found that in the classroom more casual presentations of the same ideas, in a conversational tone and divested of both technical detail and philosophical baggage, have proved much less forbidding and more accessible. This book is an attempt to take the latter approach in print form, offering a clear and straightforward introduction to this way of thinking, in the hopes that its unique insights into Buddhist practice, and perhaps into the human condition, will become more readily available for further applications and mutations. My hope is that readers will be able to gain a firm understanding of the many intriguing twists and turns of basic Tiantai thinking; to come to share somewhat in the philosophical excitement of the ideas thereby generated; and perhaps, in the best-case scenario, to pursue a more thorough and detailed comprehension of them through direct study of the primary materials in the raw form of their original setting.

ONE

JUST HERE IS THE END OF SUFFERING

Letting Suffering Be in Early Buddhism

THE PARADOX OF SUFFERING

Buddhism begins and ends with the problem of suffering. More specifically, Buddhism begins with the Four Noble Truths. At first glance, the treatment of suffering in this teaching seems disappointingly simple, almost simplistic. The First Noble Truth tells us that all experiences necessarily involve suffering. The Second tells us why this is: suffering is caused by desire, or craving, and attachment to desire. The Third asserts that the end of this cause (desire), and hence of this effect (suffering), is attainable. The Fourth tells us how to go about attaining this end of desire and suffering.

Often this formula is understood in a very straightforward way: we suffer when things don't go the way we want them to. Suffering happens when we desire what is not the case. Usually when this happens, we try to make "what *is* the case" conform to our desire: we try to get what we want. In this interpretation the Buddha makes the surprise move of approaching the dissonance between desire and reality from the opposite side: instead of changing the reality, change your desire.

But this way of understanding the problem may strike many people as wildly unsatisfactory. For one thing, can we really change what we desire? Certainly not by simply deciding to desire something else or not to desire at all; our desire is not directly subject to our will. The traditional Buddhist answer, however, is that yes, our desires can be altered, and the Fourth Noble Truth outlines how this can be done: by following the Eightfold Path of wisdom, discipline, and meditation.[1] It is a question,

ultimately, of enlightened self-interest. This process involves coming to see clearly that all experience involves suffering and that our desire for certain experiences is based on a false belief—namely, that these desired experiences will actually save us from suffering. Our desire for something other than what is the case is based on a misconception. We come to see that it is unreasonable and not in our own interest to desire what is not the case. Once we see the desire and the desired thing as forms of suffering—once we actually perceive this suffering, suffer this suffering—we automatically no longer desire them, just as perceiving the pain of holding a red-hot ball of iron leads directly to a response: to feel that it hurts is to let go of it. We can change our desires by seeing things more clearly, by noticing what we had previously ignored.

Note, however, that this still means preserving and promoting our most basic desire: to avoid suffering. All of our endeavors are aimed at maximizing pleasure and minimizing suffering, in more or less complex or indirect ways. It's just that we sometimes do so in unskillful, self-defeating ways. But for any of our experiences to be any good to us—even the experience of the end of suffering—this desire to avoid suffering must remain in place. If we really "eliminate" all desire, there will be no desire present to receive, appreciate, and enjoy the end of suffering when we attain it. In that case the end of suffering will be in no way preferable to suffering, for what makes either one worth anything is simply that it gives us something we want.

This idea brings up a more searching problem in this understanding of the Four Noble Truths: isn't this "ending of desire" in order to end the suffering it entails kind of like cutting off your nose to spite your face? Or, more forcefully, a bit like cutting off your head to cure a headache? As Nietzsche said, we do not much admire a dentist who cures toothaches only by extracting the tooth entirely. This seems a crude, somewhat fanatical, almost violent way to solve a problem that requires a more nuanced solution. Do we really want to want nothing, to take no joy in things, to passively accept whatever happens and have no opinion about it at all, no will, no initiative, no desire?

Of course, this is a crude caricature of the Buddhist position. But it is one that sometimes lurks in the background of even relatively sophisticated presentations of Buddhist thought and practice. Even a perfunc-

tory experience of Buddhist practice, however, reveals that something is wrong with it, because the end of desire turns out to be a distinctly enjoyable experience in a way that is not easy to describe or analyze within the terms of experiences of joy that are connected with desire in the more ordinary sense. One finds, to one's surprise, that this acceptance of things exactly as they are is itself an experience that is intensely satisfying, as satisfying as if one had attained something one had been fervently desiring without realizing it. It leads one to reevaluate what one means by desire, what one means by enjoyment, by satisfaction, even what one means by experience.

To try to get at why this is so, we must note that the Four Noble Truths actually present a profound paradox. Look at the logic:

> It is by ending desire that suffering is ended.
>
> But desire, by definition, is the attempt to get away from some suffering. Desire is the desire to end suffering.
>
> Therefore: it is by eventually ending the desire to end suffering that suffering can be ended!

Put another way, suffering can only be ended by no longer trying to end suffering!

A little more emphatically, we can say that even if we must first employ the "pure" desire to end suffering as a motivator that gets us to practice the Buddhist path at first, in the end it is the *acceptance* of suffering, the recognition of suffering, the full realization of suffering that finally succeeds in ending suffering. What can this mean?

INERADICABLE EVIL: ENLIGHTENMENT AS TRANSFORMATIVE INCLUSION OF, RATHER THAN REPLACEMENT OF, EVIL

In this paradox we find the seeds of a unique doctrine advocated by only one school of thought in Buddhist history, the Chinese Tiantai school: the idea that even Buddhahood, the highest possible state of enlightenment and liberation, always and inherently includes suffering within it. Suffering is ineradicable, and enlightenment does not mean eliminating it or even reducing it, but in a certain sense just the opposite: fully accepting it as literally omnipresent, just as the First Noble Truth proclaims.

Even if we can, with some strain, begin to see the logic of this position already, it may be harder to swallow the corollary: evil is ineradicable, omnipresent, and an essential element of Buddhahood. In a way this should come as no surprise to students of Buddhism, because in Buddhist psychology and ethics, evil and suffering are inextricably linked. "Evil" in Buddhism is simply defined as unskillful action that leads to suffering, for oneself, for others, or for both. In its root Buddhist sense, evil means nothing more than whatever causes suffering. In the framework of the Buddhist doctrine of causality, deeds have consequences—either observable negative events that are said to be brought about, through unseen workings of karma, by unwholesome thoughts and deeds or, more directly observable and perhaps more relevant to our concerns here, by unpleasant psychological results that are concomitant to mental dispositions of greed, anger, and delusion. Suffering is the result of evil—that is, of unskillful action, of misconceived attempts to attain happiness and avoid suffering. Evil and suffering are two ends of the same process. Evil is the beginning of suffering; suffering is the end of evil. So if Buddhahood inherently includes suffering, it must in some sense inherently include evil as well. Tiantai Buddhism proclaims "the evil inherent in the Buddha-nature" as its most distinctive doctrine, the full comprehension of which, it is claimed, is alone able to open up a realization of the deepest truths of Buddhist thought, practice, and experience.

But this perhaps just makes the situation even stranger. Isn't Buddhism all about precisely *ending* desire and therefore ending suffering? Yes, in a certain sense. However, that is not the whole story, even at the beginning of the story, in the earliest form of Buddhism embodied in the Four Noble Truths.

The Middle Way between Active Control and Passive Subjection

The Buddha's revolutionary discovery about desire is traditionally presented as a "Middle Way" between two opposite extremes. The legend of the Buddha's life outlines these two extremes in a mythical, hyperbolic fashion. First, we are told, this young prince lived a life of complete satisfaction of every desire, without ever experiencing or even being aware of frustration. The encounter with the inevitability of suffering—

in the form of illness, old age, or death, which even the sheltered prince could not escape—is highlighted in contrast to this prior vacuum. Then, we are told, he left home in search of a solution, which took the form of complete renunciation of satisfaction, denial of desire, and extreme asceticism. These, then, are the two extremes in Tiantai Buddhism:

1. Indulgence and satisfaction of desire.
2. Rejection and suppression of desire.

The Buddha's enlightenment is the discovery of a third way, a Middle Way, that rejects both of these extremes. What else can one do with a desire other than try to satisfy it or try to destroy it?

Please note that these two extremes turn out to have something in common. Both are attempts to get rid of desire. To satisfy a desire is to get rid of the desire, to replace it with satisfaction. When the desire is satisfied, the desire as desire disappears. To deny a desire is also to get rid of it, to completely eliminate it; it is to be eradicated so that no feeling of desire remains. Neither extreme allows desires to simply be present as desires. It is this unsuspected allowing of desire that provides the key to the Middle Way.

Now we can begin to understand how the analysis of desire and suffering in the classical presentations of the Four Noble Truths is considerably more subtle than the simplistic advice amounting to "If you don't get what you desire, change your desire." Observe the standard wording of the Third Noble Truth: "And what, friends, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering? It is the remainderless fading away and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting of that same craving."[2]

We see that this desire, characterized here as "craving," is indeed supposed to "fade away" and "cease." At this early stage in Buddhist thought, desire is apparently supposed to be brought to an end. But the process for doing so is explained in a puzzling way. The desire is to be "given up," "relinquished," one is to be "free from" it, "non-reliant" upon it. It is not the *desired object* (the "delight" or pleasure that one is desiring) that is to be "given up," but rather *the desire itself*. The problem is not attachment to what is desired, but attachment to desire. Evidently, we have been "reliant" not on the desired thing, but on the *desire to get*

the desired thing. We are relying on desire. What is being claimed is that if we become non-reliant upon desire, if we give it up, if we *let go of* desire, the desire will "cease."

This is odd, isn't it? Let's try getting a little more literal-minded about this. Usually when we let go of something, doing so doesn't make that thing cease or fade away; rather, it just allows the thing to fall to the ground, to fly off into space, to spin off on its own, to do what it would do without our interference. When we let go of it, it is no longer under our control. Our grasp had held it in place; when we let go, it falls or rises according to its own intrinsic tendency. We had been controlling it; when we let go of it, far from disappearing or ceasing to operate, it is now freed to be itself, beyond our control.

Is the Buddha counseling us to "let go" of desire in the sense of letting loose, letting our desire go wild, rather than trying to "control" our own desire? That seems contradictory with our common understanding of the seemingly quite "controlled" life of the early Buddhist monastic. In fact, the Buddha has had an insight here. Desire does not expand and grow when it is "let go"; rather, it withers and dies. He means that it is precisely by letting go of desire that desire ceases. That means that what was perpetuating the desire, what was keeping it from fading away, was the very act of holding on to it, trying to control it. Why is this so?

To let go of something is to let it be itself, to let it do what it does without our interference. What does "a desire" do when not interfered with? We might think the answer is "Try to fulfill itself." A desire is by nature a tendency toward its satisfaction; that is what it "wants," after all, and what it will do if left to itself. So says our common sense, and this is indeed true when the satisfaction of a particular desire is immediately available. If there is a glass of water on the table in front of me, what my "desire to quench my thirst" will do, "if left to itself," is to simply develop into the impulse to grasp the glass, the action of raising it to my lips, the drinking of the water, the satisfaction of the desire. Nothing is really "added" to the desire in this case; nothing is done to it or about it; I need have no second-order attitude toward it or even think about it or notice it at all.

But it is not these unproblematic desires that the Buddha was really talking about. Desires that are immediately adjacent to their immedi-

He wanted the power to *have or not have* gold. He wanted to be the sole cause of his having gold or not having gold. If you desire right now to taste chocolate cake, imagine how you would feel if once you attained this desire, you could never stop tasting chocolate cake. That would be a nightmare; sooner or later you would perhaps gladly commit suicide to get rid of the flavor of chocolate cake. What we want is not what we want, but to get what we want when we want it. We want control. We want selfhood. To desire something is to project into the future a definite expectation. These definite expectations come from the past. We want something in the future to match something we had in the past. When we form a mental picture of something we want—chocolate cake, for example—we are remembering something we had in the past. We are hoping to get that feeling again. We are trying to *recover* a past moment. We are trying to repeat a past pleasure, to regain the past. We want to step outside of impermanence, outside of the flow of time and the "goneness" of the past, and show our control: we want selfhood.

Here we have reached the real crux of the matter. The Buddha discovered something about all of his experiences, about all experience per se, about the nature of having an experience. An experience is *conditioned*. That means that something else has to be true for this experience to happen. It cannot make itself happen. More important, to be "conditioned" in the Buddhist sense means to be "co-conditioned." This means that every experience is not only conditioned by "something else" but also that it requires *more than one* condition in order to happen. No single cause produces an effect; every effect results from *a combination* of causes and conditions. This simple principle is the essence of all Buddhist thought, from the humblest to the most abstruse. We can understand this logically in a fairly straightforward way. Assume that there is some single thing or state of affairs, X. Assume that X is the cause of the arising in experience of something else, called Y. If X alone were sufficient to bring about the arising of Y, then whenever there was X, there would also be Y. That would mean that all along, while X, the cause, existed, it was already producing Y. That would mean that there can never have been a beginning of X's causing of Y; X and Y would always happen together. In that case, Y would really just be a part of X, an aspect or feature of X. X would always be XY. In that case, X could not account

for the arising of Y at some particular time. There would be no possibility of X causing Y to arise at some time or place in particular.

Now please notice this about "experience." For something to be experienced, it has to begin. There has to be a difference between "Y not yet having happened" and "Y happening." I must, at the very least, pass from "not yet noticing Y" to "noticing Y," even if I think Y was happening before I noticed it. It is this noticing of something that makes it an experience. So for any experience, Y, to occur, there must be some beginning to its occurrence. There must be a contrast between its presence and its absence. We would not notice anything that was always happening—and in an important sense, such a thing could not be considered to actually "happen." It has to arise at a particular time. Now, we have just seen that for something to arise at a particular time means it cannot be unconditional. For Y to be "unconditional" means that no matter what conditions may obtain in any conceivable case, no matter what the time and the place, Y must be happening then and there. "Unconditional" is synonymous with "omnipresent and eternal." But we have just seen that in that case Y would not be an experience at all. Nor can the experience Y be caused by any single cause, X, acting alone. For in that case, Y would always be there whenever X was there; we would now have to explain the arising, not of Y from X, but of XY from something else, so we have just pushed our problem back one step rather than solving it.

We can see that nothing causes itself, and nothing is caused to arise in experience by only a single other cause. This means that all experience without exception, just to even *be* an "experience," arises through the combination of several diverse causes. This means also that none of them can go on forever: none can be unconditional, none can be omnipresent and eternal. All experienced events are conditional and impermanent.

It is for this reason that the Buddha declared that there is no "self." The word "self" is very slippery and is used in many ways, so to understand this famous Buddhist denial of self we first have to be clear what is being denied. The criterion of "self" is initially that it is supposed to be something *constant*, something that remains unchanged over time throughout all of our changing experience. We might say, "I was standing but now I am sitting; I was sad but now I am happy; I was a child but now I am an adult." Situations and experiences change, but this "I,"

something called "the self," is referred to in all of these statements as something that stays the same through all of these changes, somehow underlying them or connecting them. Sometimes people refer to their body as their self; when asked which person in a photo is "you," you might point to the picture of your own body to contrast it with the pictures of all the other bodies there: that one is me. The Buddha does not deny that your body exists and is uniquely identifiable. He denies that this should count as "self," because self is supposed to be something that remains constant and unchanged over time. That identifiable body didn't exist before my birth and will not exist after my death, so it is clearly not an *eternal* self; but even during my present lifetime, on a micro level, there is no moment when it is not changing. It is impermanent, and thus it cannot be considered my self.

Conversely, sometimes people refer to their *consciousness* as their "self"; not to all the contents or objects present of which they are conscious, since I am aware of many things that I don't consider "me": the table, the chair, the sky, the earth, other people, and so on. Instead, when people use the word "myself" in this way, they mean the *one who is aware* of all these things, or perhaps the small number of mental objects to which they alone are privy, which no one else sees: their private thoughts and their private point of view are what they mean by "me." The Buddha doesn't deny that this phenomenon of awareness exists, nor that some of its contents are limited in their range of access. He just denies that this should be properly called a "self," applying the same criterion of permanence: the contents of my mind are always changing, moment by moment.

As for the alleged perceiver of these contents, which might seem to be constant, the Buddha notes that it is unavailable to consciousness, cannot be pointed out or identified as having any particular contents, is a mere conceptual construct or inference. If someone claims that there is a self apart from the changing perceptions, feelings, and thoughts we experience, the Buddha asks us to imagine removing all of these changing experiences entirely: what then would this unchanging separate self be exactly, apart from those changing experiences? Could anyone still say or think, "This is me?" The constant subject of perception, the perceiver of our perceptions and the thinker of our thoughts, is never perceived and

never even conceived of as having any particular characteristics, as being an identifiable entity. The Buddha suggests that this allegedly unchanging possessor of perceptions and thoughts is inconceivable and unimaginable in isolation from the changing flow of perceptions and thoughts, and thus is itself only conceivable as involving change. As something that has no conceivable being in isolation from change, inseparable from change in its very being, the unchanging perceiving self is a mere abstraction, not a concretely existent unchanging entity as it claims to be. In fact, all experience requires change; nothing constant would even be experienced at all, since to experience any content requires contrast, and no self is conceivable apart from experience. So consciousness, as the stream of these constant changes of experience, is also not the self.[3]

Since nothing we experience is constant, why do we even have a notion of "self"—something that is supposed to be constant in our experience—to begin with? If we think about the origins of our notion of self, it seems plausible to assume that it has something to do with *what obeys our will*. An infant is aware of many things in the world, including sensations of his own body and mind. He begins to differentiate self from nonself in this total field of experience by noting that some things obey his will—his hands and feet, his voice and body—while others, like the sun and moon, his parents, the spoon on the table, do not obey his will except intermittently and always through the mediation of actions of his body or mind. Some things he controls directly and consistently: these come to be considered "self." Some things he controls only when other things cooperate in just the right way, and even then always only with the participation of the first class of things: these come to be considered "nonself."

We tend to think of our self, the constant experiencer of our changing experiences, as the "possessor" of our experience. But this association is very telling: after all, a possessor is not only what is constant; it is also the *owner* who has jurisdiction, who has control, over what is possessed. Do we control our experiences? Can we decide, unilaterally, what to experience? Constancy is tied, in the notion of self, to the notion of control. But control means simply what happens due to *a single cause*: if a single cause makes something happen, we say that single cause is the controller of that event. This is what is meant by a self: the owner, con-

Without sufficient oxygen in the room, I may have the thought, "I'd like to raise my right hand," but the strength in my body will be insufficient: my hand stays still. If there is *no* oxygen in the room, I am unable to even conceive the volition "Raise right hand"! Even my volition, which seemed to be a sole controlling cause, is not in control of its own presence or absence: it too depends on other, prior causes for its existence. Whatever it seems to do on its own is actually accomplished by an immense network of contributing, cooperating causes, both those that are needed to create its willed effects and those that brought this volition into existence in the first place.

Why, then, do we think we are "selves"? It is because we normally do not notice all of those prior causes and conditions, such as oxygen in the room, that contribute to the seeming success of our sole agency and control, our ability to be the sole cause of what happens to us, our selfhood. It is because we are in the habit of neglecting so much of what is happening when we do something, or feel something, or think something. It is because our awareness is narrowed down to notice only the most glaringly altering condition—the sudden appearance of this volition or desire—that acts as the turning point or the straw that breaks the camel's back. We see a straw drop onto the camel—our desire to move our arm—and notice that the camel's back then, "as a result," breaks: the arm moves. We do not notice the enormous pile of other straws that was there already, that also contributed to the breaking of the camel's back. Hence we think this straw has the power to break camel backs. *We think we are a self due to the narrowness and crudity of our awareness.*

Now we can understand what the "Middle Way" between indulgence and repression of desire is. It is *awareness of desire*. A desire is a psychophysical state. It is an experience. All experiences are necessarily, by definition, conditioned existences. As such, they have three necessary characteristics, summarized in what is known in some Buddhist traditions as "The Three Marks of the Dharma":

1. *All conditioned things are impermanent.*

If a thing has any conditions that are necessary for its existence, it will be absent when those conditions are not present. But whatever exists only in certain times or places has conditions and is not unconditional: its existence is conditioned by it being a certain time and a certain place

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