The Buddhist Psychology *of* Awakening

An In-Depth Guide to Abhidharma

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Preface

A few words about the focus and origin of this book may help to orient the reader. First, the focus: For whom was this written? It was written primarily for those who have or might develop an interest in the very basic Buddhist teachings associated with what Tibetan traditions call the "first turning of the wheel of the Dharma." Here, there are grouped teachings on proper conduct (vinaya), discourses (sutras), and commentaries (shastras), and the basic teachings that came to be gathered together under the rubric of Higher Dharma (Abhidharma). The teachings on Higher Dharma are, for the most part, rather technical, consisting of main points and enumerated lists of basic factors (*dharmas*) of phenomena mentioned in the sutras.

There is a rich codification of such teachings preserved in the early Pali Buddhist traditions and thereafter in the Theravadin Abhidharma literature. In addition, there is a different set of texts used by the living traditions associated with Indo-Tibetan Buddhist lineages, which is the focus of this book. These have been largely preserved in Sanskrit as well as in translation in Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolian languages. Primary among these texts is the *Treasury of Higher Dharma* (*Abhidharmakosha*) by the fifth-century Indian Buddhist savant Vasubandhu.

My love of the Abhidharma was catalyzed by Emeritus Professor Jaini (University of California at Berkeley), who stressed that a thorough knowledge of the Abhidharma tradition should be the bedrock and starting point for all Buddhist studies. I hope that some glimmers of insight and humor, in spite of flaws in my understanding, may dawn in the minds of readers. Perhaps more importantly, I have also been inspired by the living tradition of Buddhist study and practice, and it is to that tradition and those lineages that I pay homage and gratitude. Scholars and those who are well versed in the original source materials may find this approach too cavalier. This book, therefore, is not aimed at the specialist who can read the original texts themselves. Rather, it is aimed at inviting a fresh look at this noble tradition; it is for those who might seek to refresh their view on Buddhist basics and then, perhaps, to actually apply that view in their practice.

The challenge is to find a way to present the main points of this rather encyclopedic compendium that might inspire and guide the curious modern reader into the profundity and nuances of an "Abhidharma" approach to the view and

practice of the Buddhadharma. I have chosen to give an account, based on the compendium itself and the Tibetan commentaries and summaries based upon it, that strives to bring out a lively, relevant, and what might be considered a somewhat novel way to actually apply some of the key approaches of the Higher Dharma for a contemporary nonspecialist readership.

One might ask how the technical language of a fifth-century tradition on the Buddhadharma can provide something relevant for modern times? I have tested and refined the material in this book and have placed a primary emphasis on using conversational, casual, and nontechnical language in order to show, using everyday examples, how some of the central insights of Abhidharma might still be accessible and useful to those who approach the study and practice of the Buddhadharma in contemporary times.

Of course, there will be errors of fact, but hopefully the spirit of inquiry is faithful to Vasubandhu and his heirs. The reader will note that I refer, here and there, to Tibetan Buddhist teachers to make certain points. I do this, in part, because these teachings are vibrant and thriving in the living lineages that they transmit, and I myself continue to be inspired by such examples.

The Origins of This Book

Many years ago, at the newly established Nyingma Institute in Berkeley, California, the head Tibetan Buddhist teacher Tarthang Tulku urged me to begin an intensive study of what was then available of the Abhidharma literature in European languages. To that end, I prepared a rough translation from the French of the "Abdhidharma" section of Etienne Lamotte's *L'Histoire du Buddhisme Indien,* which is now available in English translation. Then I delved into a study of Louis de la Vallée-Poussin's French translation of Vasubandhu's *Kosha,* entitled *L'Abhidharmakosha,* now also available in English translation by Pruden (1991). This background work was soon supplemented by a study of the Tibetan translations of Vasubandhu's work, works written in Tibetan as commentaries on the *Kosha*, and works written by Indian commentators. Finally, I was led to study and translate key portions of Ju Mipham Rinpoche's *Gateway to Knowledge* and the commentary on it by Kathog Khenpo Nuden. This text by Mipham is now also available in English in full, translated by Erik Pema Kunsang.

What I culled from these studies was a desire to present "key points of view" to eager graduate students at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, via its affiliation with the newly established Nyingma Institute. These students were bright and engaged and asked many questions about the diverse categories of dharmas and their arrangement into "conditioned" and "unconditioned." They also asked what any of this had to do with the foundational teachings of the Buddhadharma, such as the four noble truths (suffering, the causes of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering). From the very beginnings of teaching this material, we explored the possible implications for what emerged as what we might call a special kind of "Buddhist psychology" and how such study might inspire and provoke a new way forward into foundational and transformational practices.

Sometime after those initial presentations, I was invited to explore these approaches at the Naropa Institute (now Naropa University) in Boulder, Colorado, to a lively and engaged group of Buddhist students. In subsequent years, and through many refinements, this material was taught in courses at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco and at a summer study program at the Rigpa Shedra in Southern France.

Thus, what you have before you is a reworked and edited presentation of these lectures and teaching materials that are based on the Indo-Tibetan textual traditions of Abhidharma. I hope some of these novel approaches may prove to be beneficial in presenting a coherent introduction to the depth and precision of Abhidharma methods to the study of Buddhadharma. Finally, I hope that the light and conversational tone of this book will be inviting to all.

Acknowledgments

I must acknowledge those teachers who first encouraged me to undergo the study and exploration of the Abhidharma: Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche (Nyingma Institute), Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (Naropa Institute), Professor Jaini (University of California, Berkeley), and Professor Herbert Guenther (University of Saskatchewan). Without their encouragement and goading, I would not have ventured into these wild forests of study. Secondly, I must thank both Tulku Thondup and Daniel Goleman for reviewing this work when it was still in manuscript form. Their encouragement and kind words are greatly appreciated. Finally, I must thank both Snow Lion and now Shambhala Publications for accepting this book for publication. And thank you to my first editor Dave O'Neal and my final editor Casey Kemp for their attention to form and content. Finally, thanks are due to the editorial skills of Lea Samphel for her work on the notes and many other details. To all the students, colleagues, and recorders and transcribers of various versions of this material over the years, I give thanks and trust that your efforts to bring this study to light will be met with approval. May those in the future who chance upon this study at least be inspired to inquire more deeply into the rich traditions of the Buddhadharma.

Introduction

> In a phrase, all of the teachings of the Buddha might be seen as concrete methods to go from *duhkha* to *sukha*.

This book presents an approach to Buddhist psychology that tries to make practical sense of some of the core teachings and approaches of the Higher Dharma (Abhidharma) according to the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist traditions. It primarily focuses on the fifth-century Sanskrit classic entitled *Treasury of Higher Dharma* (*Abhidharmakosha*) by the famed Indian Buddhist scholar Vasubandhu and on subsequent works written by masters in the Indo-Tibetan tradition. The importance of the *Treasury of Higher Dharma* continues even in these present times, as witnessed by Ian James Coghlan's recent translation of the commentary by Chim Jampaiyang, who is credited with composing the first commentary written by a native Tibetan scholar (see full listing in references under Chim Jampaiyang, 2019).

The *Treasury of Higher Dharma* is based on the tradition of reflection on the legacy of the Buddha's discourses (sutras) that were orally transmitted and studied in and around what was historically known as Gandhara in North-west India. Based on the encyclopedic text known as the *Great Compendium* (*Mahavibhasha*) —which today only survives in Chinese translation—Vasubandhu, according to tradition, would lecture on one topic for a day, and, at the conclusion, compose a four-line verse summarizing that lecture in a very concise form; this was done mostly to serve as a mnemonic device for later study. He composed almost five hundred such verses and wrote a commentary on them known as the *Commentary to the Treasury of Higher Dharma* (*Abhidharmakoshabhashya*), which consists of eight chapters (though a ninth chapter, on the nature of the self, *pudgala,* was later added). Those eight primary chapters embody a vast range of erudition, with detailed discussions about the nature of the person and their world, karma, emotional impediments, and meditative states. The technical terms and definitions embodied in Vasubandhu's autocommentary have served as the primary material for almost all subsequent musings on the "higher" meaning of the Buddha's discourses and ethical guidance. There were subsequent commentaries on Vasubandhu's *Treasury* written in Sanskrit and translated into Tibetan as well as

original Tibetan commentaries, which are studied to this day in the context of Buddhist colleges of higher learning.

From a doctrinal point of view, for those so interested, the *Treasury* lays out the primary tenets of the Sarvastivadin school (considered one of the eighteen schools that developed in India several hundred years after the death of Shakyamuni Buddha). This school was foundational for the Tibetan traditions understanding of both rules of conduct (vinaya) and the higher meaning of the sutras. The Sarvastivadin views embodied in the *Abhidharmakosha* are not to be confused or conflated with the Staviravadin or Theravadin (Way of the Elders) traditions, which are textually based on the Pali Buddhist Canon and have their own approach to Higher Dharma study; an outstanding example of which is *The Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*) by Buddhaghosa.[1]

Why Study?

The View

Some traditional Buddhist teachers have said that they observe Western Buddhists to have a sincere heart and a sense of practice and its importance, but lack a stable view, which comes from study. Perhaps one way to address this lack of a stable view is to encourage Westerners to use their habitual tendencies to make discriminating distinctions in a new way. The Buddhist term often used to talk about this "new way" of thinking is sometimes translated as the *view* or *right view*. This starts an eightfold list (the eightfold path) that represents the traditional way of explaining how to find oneself on the path to cessation of suffering. The eightfold path (*marga*) was first elaborated by the Buddha at Sarnath when he turned the wheel of the Dharma for the first time. The eight are (1) right view (*samyak drishti*), (2) right thought (*samyak samkalpa*), (3) right speech (*samyak vak*), (4) right conduct (*samyak karmanta*), (5) right livelihood (*samyak ajiva*), (6) right effort (*samyak vyayama*), (7) right mindfulness (*samyak smriti*), and (8) right concentration (*samyak samadhi*). Subsequent writings categorize these eight into three categories: (1) wisdom (comprising 1 and 2), (2) conduct (comprising 3, 4, and 5), and (3) meditation (comprising 6, 7, and 8).

The path indicates both a destination—that is, a place to go—and also the road or way that leads to that destination. If one finds this path and learns how not to deviate from it—or knows how to become aware of the deviation and then find one's way back—this path will lead us to our destination, which Buddhists call "liberation," the cessation of all suffering (*nirodha,* or *nirvana*). *Nirvana* is a term that has worked its way into the English lexicon (most recently as the name for a popular rock group). In the eightfold listing of the path, *view* is given the first place in the traditional explanation of how to distinguish between what is a path to nirvana and what is not—between what encourages and sustains us on the path and what blocks or mystifies us so that we can't make the distinction.

The Path

Many people think that *path* means something like an already-existent road, as if someone already did the hard work and all one has to do is get his or her legs onto

it, and as soon as they're on it, everything will go splendidly. But perhaps a more accurate translation would be *journey*. In fact, in the Indian Buddhist context, the Sanskrit word for path, *marga,* is often used with an instrumental grammatical ending (*margena*)—it is "by means of the path" that one goes.

This has been interpreted to mean it is a journey, an inner process of finding our way—by means of intellect and heart—out of the thick forest of confusion and pain and into a clearing from which we can first glimpse, and then perceive more stably, a way of proceeding with a sense of confidence.

Dharma Is Difficult to Precisely Communicate

Now, you might ask, "What does this path have to do with study?" For many people, this question might never arise. For most people, it seems, might never think of a path or journey out of suffering; they are too absorbed with the stresses of everyday life, right? For most people, then, this talk about a path might seem rather strange. Talk about the Dharma is not, in many cases, easy to square with our everyday concerns of "this life." That is not to say it is difficult, but to use the words of the Buddha himself, the Dharma is "profound, easily misinterpreted, and very difficult to precisely communicate so that a particular individual might understand."

This is why the Buddha said that those who are inspired by the sublime Dharma (*saddharma*)—this sublime way of upholding what is most important—would be well advised to learn the habits of precisely communicating in a language and style that is specifically appropriate to the temperaments, cultural backgrounds, and motivations of those who have shown an interest.

These basic Dharma teachings were never meant for the crowd or the pub, at least not the basic teachings. (In time, however, it seems the Buddhadharma was transmitted in many unusual contexts.) These basic teachings are a true and reliable way of learning how to identify and then eliminate sources of pain and suffering.

The Benefits of Study and Practice

At the end of the day, what do we imagine we might get through the study and practice of the Dharma? What do the Dharma treatises promise us, and what are their guarantees? What are the contraindications? What are the side effects? Will we see rainbow colors everywhere if we just sit long enough, are calm enough, are spacious enough, and learn well enough how not to grasp? Well, perhaps not.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche once said that the sign of an advanced Dharma practitioner is that he or she discovers that life becomes somewhat more workable. And on another occasion, he said that the sign of a good Dharma practitioner is that they no longer feel the need to apologize for the varieties of their neurotic tendencies.

For those of us of who are not advanced practitioners but are of average or lesser capacity and realization, it's important to realize that it is natural—even as a Dharma practitioner, or maybe especially as a Dharma practitioner—that quite often things are not going well at all. Also, if we actually feel we are of average or lesser capacity, we may experience embarrassment and try to prevent others from discovering how truly neurotic we are. The point here is that it is to be expected,

and in that sense it is "natural" and even predictable that we defend and deny the range of our rather crazed internal musings. The Buddhadharma reminds us that this defense and denial is to a very great extent just who we are; therefore, there is no point in fighting it or hiding it, especially from ourselves. The Buddhadharma suggests that the cultivation of an attitude of acceptance toward how we are, a mindful acceptance that we will experience many varieties of pleasant and unpleasant mental and emotional states, is "natural."

It is precisely the varieties of everyday "neurotic" experiences that we will explore in this book. The focus will be on the very basic teachings of the Dharma, and we will come to see how these teachings classified as the Higher Dharma (Abhidharma) lay out the variety and dynamics of these ever-changing states.

Finding the Right Medicine

When we consider the first step of the so-called eightfold noble path, right view, it is not at all obvious what the right view actually is. Therefore, it is said that study and practice are necessary, not only to find the right view but also to establish that view in a concrete way, in all the different situations of our lives. Right view is not operating only when we're calm and being "good" Buddhist practitioners but also when we are distracted and when we completely forget all the heart advice of our teachers. The goal is to be free from distraction, both when we're calm and when we're agitated. The way to do this is the heart of "practice"—it is a deep, vital, and not obvious thing.

Sometimes the Dharma is likened to medicine for those who are dying. There are other ways teachers have characterized the import of the Dharma. A contemporary teacher once said that the purpose of the teachings is to encourage us to become totally free, to be autonomous and flexible, and not to be conditioned or caged—not even caged or conditioned by the teachings themselves. It is said that the role of a good teacher is to skillfully encourage us to come out of all limited perspectives, to reveal to us our secret, hidden faults. Patrul Rinpoche (1808–1887), author of the acclaimed classic on Buddhist practice entitled *The Words of My Perfect Teacher,* puts it starkly. He quotes the Bengali master Atisha (982–1054), writing:

> The best spiritual friend is one who attacks your hidden faults. The best instructions are the ones that aim squarely at those faults.[2]

In the context of the eightfold noble path, those hidden and habitual faults are the ones which block right view from emerging and guiding us on a genuine spiritual journey toward awakening, one suffused with what the Dalai Lama characterizes as clarity, kindness, and insight.

How to Study

Many teachers have stressed the importance of taking delight and enjoyment from study. But, unfortunately—like a little child who doesn't know the actual taste of many foods—we might be falsely encouraged to put everything we see into our mouth, only to find out that it doesn't correspond to our nature, and so we reject or spit out those foods. Some like to approach their studies as if they were invited to an elaborate buffet, or smorgasbord; they are not obliged to eat everything they see

but instead choose what they like according to taste, perspective, or temperament. The point is to discover, through experimental "tasting," what brings us to depth and clarity. All that does not bring us to such depth or clarity can be set aside.

One of the ways in which an aversion to certain topics of study may manifest is with a sense of agitation or drowsiness, terms we may generally associate with calm abiding[3] (*shamatha*) or insight (*vipashyana*) meditation practice. But all of us, in our everyday lives, are sometimes agitated or sometimes depressed. We might say that the Buddha encouraged us to understand that being human is more or less to cycle through ups and downs, so there is really no need to apologize for that. We might, in time, come to recognize and accept that these ups and downs are in fact our nature. And, more to the point, we might come to discover that these ups and downs are not at all permanent, or invariant; they are based on the coming together and cooperation of many factors of experience.

So, then, we might say that the study and practice of the Dharma can be understood as a way to explore those many factors of experience and then gradually find ways to diminish and eliminate the painful aspects of their occurrences. Such study and practice can be a way to explore how we are caged in by our unexamined habits of attention, by our viewpoints, so as to come out of such habits.

Many Buddhists practice the Dharma with a sense of guilt, a sense of not wanting to disappoint their teachers. They practice with a sense of anxiety regarding their promises and pledges (*samaya*); they do their prostrations and so on with a tight mind. As mentioned before, whether we are practicing the Dharma or not, we often proceed through this life with this same tight mindset. It seems that our basic attitude doesn't change, whether acting in daily life or in our "Dharma life." It is in that sense that Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche once remarked that if we practice Dharma with that sense of fear and uptightness, this is not really Dharma practice; it is mental torture.

So, in short, regarding the material presented in this book, I would like to encourage the reader to find what is useful. If it is useful, use it, taste it, celebrate and enjoy it! If it doesn't go down well, maybe find some other ways to explore this expansive material. The suggestion is that "study" might be a way to deepen and clarify our perspectives on what we ourselves regard as important.

The Buddha's Decision to Teach

I would like to present a brief summary of the very first teachings that the one born as Siddhartha Gautama, who later came to be known as the Buddha, imparted in Sarnath, India, teachings that he gave for the first time publicly after his awakening. The Sanskrit word *buddha* means "having awakened." Tradition reports that something rather astounding occurred after his awakening. The Buddha is alleged to have not wanted to teach others about the insights that had arisen for him upon that occasion. He said that the Dharma was so deep and its importance so difficult to communicate that he preferred not to do so.

Traditional accounts such as the *Request Sutta* (*Ayacana Sutta*) report that an apparitional being—what we might call a sprite—by the name Brahma Sahampati

said to the Buddha, "You have to teach." And Buddha said, "No." Sahampati asked, "Why?" And Buddha replied, "Because the Dharma is deep and difficult to understand." The Buddha then stated, "If I were to teach the Dhamma and if others would not understand me, that would be tiresome for me, troublesome for me."[4]

This sprite goes on to say that he must teach anyway, because he has always taught in the past. And, furthermore, now again, upon his realization, it is the time to share and to teach the appropriate ways to use this precious medicine of the Dharma to cure the painful conditions of living beings.

To this, the Buddha, after a moment of reflection, replied that Brahma Sahampati was right. The Buddha realized that in the past he came to the same point, and therefore he must teach. Thereupon the Buddha walked to modern-day Sarnath, and there he delivered a discourse wherein he is said to have talked about the path for the very first time. This discourse came to be called "Turning the Wheel of the Dharma."[5]

So, why recount this story? Because if the Buddha himself was not in such a hurry, and if the Buddha reflected on the profundity, the nonobvious nature, and the difficulty and the importance of the Dharma, then perhaps we also might be encouraged not to become too anxious about our ability to quickly understand the totality and the depth of his teachings in a short period of time.

The Noble Insights

Within the context of that first discourse, the Buddha—the One Who Had Awakened—spoke of four insights. I would now like to contextualize the traditional account of how talk of path and view arose in the experience of the Buddha. Only after a difficult and long period of study and reflection did the Buddha come to an awakening. It was in the context of the very first recorded teachings he gave that he said there were four certainties about reality, four noble truths:

1. The truth of suffering (*duhkha*)
2. The truth of the causes of suffering (*samudaya*)
3. The truth of the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*)
4. The truth of the way or path (*marga*) to the cessation of suffering

The term he used for "certainty" was the Sanskrit word *satya,* which is sometimes translated as "truth." However, this word *satya* comes from the Sanskrit root *as*, which means "that which is, that which exists, that which is actually the case." Hence, it is what is "true" in the sense of what is in accord with reality. It is "what is real." Truth is what is in accord with what is real. To translate the full meaning of the word *satya,* most languages would need to use two words with two slightly different flavors: "reality" and "truth." Which one of the two is best to translate the Sanskrit word *satya*? Most English-language books on Buddhism translate it as "truth"; so we commonly see the phrase "Buddha's four noble *truths*." But the flavor of the word *reality* is a little bit different. The Sanskrit word *satya* can mean "what is real," "truly real," or "actually real." In Western philosophy, one

sometimes finds a "correspondence theory" of truth; so truth is what corresponds to what is taken as the "real" state of things. It is a friend of reality. It is not fighting it; it works with it.

In the Indian context, there is a strong sense that when the Buddha spoke about these four *satyas,* he was talking about two senses of the term: what is actual and real, and what corresponds with that. In addition to these two senses, the Buddha noted that these "truths" and the reality they corresponded to were not easily understood or even commonly accepted "truths." He had discovered, or awoken to, "noble truths" (*arya satya*). The point here is that this very first teaching of his was not a talk about ordinary reality, nor was this an ordinary talk about reality, nor was this an ordinary talk about what corresponds to reality. The term he chose to signify what was not ordinary was the term *noble* (*arya*). It modifies the term *reality*: these "truths" or "realities" (*satyas*) were noble and nonordinary.

In many accounts of Buddhism, one finds the word *arya* often translated as "noble." But when you hear this word, what does it mean? It carries the sense of that which is above the ordinary; it has a sense of dignity and nobility, something valuable, something most worthy of note.

Here, then, the Buddha is discoursing on "truth" or "realities" that are not common. They are valuable, precious, and not corruptible; their nature won't change. There could be so many ways to translate the adjective *arya* into Tibetan because the Tibetans have many words for honorable, dignified, incorruptible, and valuable.[6] But they chose the word *pakpa,* which means "to be above," "to rise above," or "to go beyond the ordinary." The Buddha was not talking about what common people take to be real—the so-called "truth" of the marketplace, that of a "samsaric perspective"—but, rather, something *arya,* something elevated beyond that, and hence noble.

First Insight: Crowded Space

Precisely what were these noble truths, or insights—these unusual and profound realities—which the Buddha hesitated to speak of in the first place? What the Buddha said is that there are many things that might characterize the life of a living being. He wanted to isolate one predominant tendency and give it first place. He did not say that this is the only experience that living beings have, but he wanted to give first place to an observation that totally transformed him, that awakened him. And the word he chose, of all the words he could have chosen to talk about the wide variety of experiences that human beings undergo, was a very strange word with extremely strange translations. He chose the word *duhkha,* a word that is usually translated into English as "suffering" or sometimes "pain."

Let's examine this Sanskrit word *duhkha*. The first part, "duh" is related to the Greek prefix "*dys*" and the English prefix "*dis*," as in, for instance, the word *dysfunctional. Dys* means something is not working well. It modifies the next part of the word, which is "*kha*," meaning "space." Together, "*duhkha*," just going by the formation of the word itself, might convey a sense of a space that is a bit off, out of joint, crowded, or cramped. In that crowded space, things don't work well. Hence, they are unsatisfactory, and by association, they are "painful." One of the earliest occurrences of the word *duhkha* seems to be a description of a bull cart on which the axles are "*duhkha,*" meaning "out of the groove," so that the cart cannot roll on;

it is dysfunctional. Now, the opposite of this is the Sanskrit word *sukha*. *Su* is related to the Greek prefix "*eu*," as in the word *euphonious*. Sukha is space that is harmonious. Usually, however, the word *sukha* is translated as "bliss" or "well-being."

We might say that for most people many experiences arise as being crowded; they are potentially or actually suffused with suffering or the cause of suffering. The Sanskrit expression for this is *sarvam dukham* (everything is painful) But it is not obvious what this actually means, and it seems to not correspond to our experiences of happiness and well-being, right? It takes a great deal of study and practice to come to a deep, certain, and settled understanding of what *sarvam duhkham* means according to the Buddhadharma, and why, in spite of it, life is still worth living.

Going from Crowded Space to Open Space

The very first valuable, superior, and uncommon truth that truly is said to be in accord with our nature is duhkha; it corresponds to the fact that we lead our lives duhkha-like, with a lack of spaciousness. We might say, then, that the entire teaching of the Buddha is an instruction on how to find oneself in sukha, "an expanded space," "a space of well-being." Thus, the Buddha taught how to move from "duh-kha" to "su-kha."

In this condensed presentation of the teachings of the Buddha, the concrete methods that show one how to go from duhkha to sukha, known as the path, what remains the same throughout this whole process, is "kha," or "space" (in later teachings, this is referred to as "the expanse," "our basic nature," "our buddha nature," and "our basic goodness"). The crucial point here is that our basic goodness, our buddha nature, the great expanse of what is, has never changed; it is our experience that changes. And it is those changes which, for the most part, we regard as unwanted experiences and therefore as a source of pain and suffering.

The Buddha said that this duhkha, this "crowdedness," is the disease for which the medicine of the Dharma was intended—not to make us new or different, but to concretely reestablish our basic spaciousness and our basic well-being. Many of the teachings of the Dharma encourage us to discover and then to confidently trust in our inborn, natural capacity for spaciousness, our buddha nature, our naturally arising primordial wisdom, our stainless wisdom mind.

Second Insight: The Causes for Suffering

The second insight is that this crowdedness and all the suffering that follows from it is due to multiple and different conditions coming together (*samudaya*). Samudaya is sometimes translated as "cause." What it means more precisely is "the coming together or arising of the conditions" for suffering, and this is how the Tibetans translated the Sanskrit term *samudaya* (Tib. *kunjung*), the occurrence or arising of all (the conditions) pertaining to the presence of duhkha.

This second noble truth or insight, which seems to aptly correspond with our nature, might be rendered as "the pattern or causes of this crowded way of living." It is said that this crowdedness is due entirely to temporary conditions obscuring our basic nature. That is very easy to say, isn't it? What we take to be "ourselves" is precisely this sense of crowdedness, this sense of dis-ease.

In this sense, then, study and practice present ways of recognizing the dynamics of our everyday conditions. Those conditions tend to obscure our possibility of spaciousness as our basic nature. It is as simple and as complicated as that. We forget that our habits of reflection are a concrete, total presentation of our distractedness and forgetfulness of such spaciousness. What we habitually take to be "clarity" or "understanding" can, upon further reflection, often be revealed to be entirely conditioned by temporary and crowded modes of reflection. When we discover this, it is not a matter for despair anymore than we should be despondent when we see clouds in the sky. Only a child or a fool or an idiot would feel that the presence of clouds meant that life was not worth living.

In summary, the first noble truth is that we have a crowded experience of life. And the second noble truth involves discovering the variety of factors that constitute this sense of crowdedness. Such a discovery, moreover, is not bad news; such discovering is the Dharma because Dharma is "that which is in accord with what truly is." We are, here, merely reminding the reader that these traditions of Higher Dharma encourage us to concretely, honestly, and spaciously begin to discover and acknowledge the variety and modes of upset and crowdedness we all experience.

Third Insight: Cessation

The Buddha furthermore said that this coming together of conditions that cause this crowdedness can be completely destroyed—not merely lessened, but "destroyed," or "annihilated." The word he used for his third noble truth or insight about reality was *nirodha,* a word which means "to annihilate." This is a very strong word. *Nirodha* means to annihilate the conditions of this crowded, painful situation.

So far, we've presented the first three of the four noble truths. They are:

1. The fact of crowdedness
2. The fact that this crowdedness is due to concrete, discoverable conditions
3. The fact that these conditions, which are temporary and concrete, can completely cease, they will be annihilated, they will be blown out, better known as *nirvana*

Buddha said that nirvana/nirodha, "the cessation (of all upset)," results in a peaceful (*shanti*) way of being, one which is also relaxing, harmonious, and spacious. But he cautions that this state is not just the opposite of duhkha. When speaking of nirvana, this spaciousness is a radiant mode of being that is beyond all distinction between that which is pleasant (sukha) or painful (duhkha). Therefore, it is called the great or absolute sukha (*maha sukha*). Nirvana is *maha sukha*. It is beyond the distinction of "sunny" or "cloudy." It refers to the radiant, continuous expanse of the sky, which accommodates all weather patterns.

Fourth Insight: The Path to the Cessation of Suffering

The fourth insight or truth the Buddha discovered is that each person has the innate capacity for discovering precisely how to annihilate the conditions that cause suffering. The term he used for this capacity was *marga*—"path" or

"journey." This is the capacity to learn how to annihilate the conditions which cause duhkha, this crowded situation, and thereby be moved away from one's former pain and suffering. Traversing the path elaborated by the Buddhadharma—through study and practice—provides concrete methods for showing us how to live in a more calm and stable way and for showing how one can journey out of the thick darkness and into the light, into the spacious expanse of full and complete being. In a more psychological sense of the teachings on the four noble truths, "path" names the progressive discovery and stabilization of precisely how to go about dissolving, annihilating, and no longer being conditioned by the conditions which cause suffering.

Now, of course, annihilating these conditions will take a bit of work. It doesn't just happen in the same way that Newton, who was hit on his head by an apple falling from a tree, is said to have "discovered" the law of gravity. It is not the case (for most people) that we just see how things are and are then liberated. We don't typically say, "Oh, now I see: all conditioned things are impermanent! Voila! I'm liberated!" That might be so for some individuals,[7] but normally it takes a bit of work. It's not that this entails some type of mental torture, but it does require some sense of spacious, good-hearted inquiry and also some discrimination about which food nourishes us and what is appropriate to how we are at the moment. To extend the metaphor, a good practitioner is one who becomes a bit of a food connoisseur, a *gourmand*. Finding the food that corresponds to our nature is the way, the path—that is, the "path leading to cessation." In that sense, then, all sincere study and practice can be part of the path.

Old-Dog Practitioners

In the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, there is talk about "old-dog practitioners." An old-dog practitioner is likened by many great masters to a rock that sits in a riverbed. For hundreds of years, fresh water has been running over it, and one could imagine: "Oh, that rock is so wet and shiny." But at some point, someone might make an inquiry into the actual nature of that rock. They might lift it out of the river, crack it open, and discover that the inside is completely dry. That is a metaphor for old-dog practitioners—they've been submerged in the river of the Dharma for a long time, but that sublime water of the Dharma has not yet penetrated into their core.

For years, the shiny projection to others of being a "good Dharma practitioner" may have fooled many—both ourselves and others. (Maybe we truly thought we were good practitioners.) In this state of delusion, and yet with a good conscience, we might spend years straying from the path of awakening. One possible way in which we might stray is by developing a lifestyle that we call "being a Buddhist." It becomes habitual. The teachings contain many examples of this. It is important to acquire the tools necessary to recognize whether we are truly on the path or not to ensure we are not deluding ourselves.

What Concretely Is the Path?

This brings us to an important question: What concretely is the path, and how would we know? Remembering the example of the rock in the river, we might reflect, "I'm wet on the outside, therefore I must be a good Dharma practitioner. I have the costume, I have my meditation beads and my altar, and I have my good feelings of devotion, so that should be enough." Well, apparently it's not enough. The Buddha said there were eight aspects to this path, the so-called eightfold path. Each of these aspects of the path might be seen as indicating a cautionary tale, an indication, a possible repertoire for mindful monitoring, so that at any point we can check whether or not, "Dharmically" speaking, we are drifting away from the path.

How do we know whether we are on the path? We may have expectations that one day we will find the path. That means we may have a view that's based on hope and fear. We may think, "I hope to be on the path, I fear not being on the path, therefore I am on the path." Well, that doesn't really seem to correspond to the reality of the path.

The main point here is this: although all study and practice of the Buddhadharma is to stabilize us on the path, the path itself is not the main point of the Dharma. So what, then, is the point? The main point is arriving at the destination that the path leads to. That goal or destination is the cessation of suffering, and once one arrives, one no longer obsesses about "the path." The journey is complete.

The Eightfold Path

The point of studying the Dharma is to discern and stabilize right view, to cut through the conditioned patterns and causes of crowdedness and discomfort. One might note that, in practice, one applies the four noble truths in reverse: We learn how to be on the path (fourth noble truth) so as to cut through and cease (third noble truth) the conditioned patterning (second noble truth) of discomfort and pain (first noble truth).

But how do we walk the path and discern whether we are on it or not? There are eight aspects to the path, and though we will be concentrating on the first, possessing the right view, it's important to remember the other seven. In addition to right view, there is right thought. We might think right thought and right view must mean the same thing, but the Buddha made a distinction and he put right view first.[8]

Completely Pure View

The very first item mentioned by the Buddha in his elaboration of the eightfold path was *samyak drishti*. *Samyak* is translated as "right," "correct," or "genuine;" and *drishti* can be understood to mean "view," "understanding," or "perspective." The Sanskrit root of *drishti—drish*—means "to see" in the sense of "to understand" or "to comprehend." It is a very deep metaphor, using the eye metaphorically as the organ of insight. This "seeing" as a metaphor for understanding or discerning is well attested in much of Indian philosophy. It is also present in European philosophy and is a notion that has been around since the time of the Greeks. "To

see," here, means to discern or to understand.

What we think we understand is a way of being, a way of seeing how to proceed. But the Buddhadharma cautions that our "normal" way of seeing is suffused with habits of understanding that are best characterized as being pervasively unsatisfactory. This "seeing," this "drishti," undergirds and perpetuates the causes of suffering. By contrast, "right" seeing (*samyak drishti*) is the way of understanding which is correct or genuine. It is defined as a way of being and understanding that leads one to the precise knowledge of how to annihilate or overcome every cause, source, and condition of suffering. This is the view, the "right view," in the Buddhist sense. It is the reason for studying and practicing the Dharma.

Just as the term *suffering* sometimes causes a problem in our understanding because it's a very profound, deep, and nuanced realization of the Buddha, we are not talking about "right" in any ordinary way. It does sound like right versus wrong, doesn't it? It sounds like there is a right view and wrong view, a good view and a bad view. We've even heard the term "wrong view" or "perverse view" mentioned in Buddhist texts. If we hear this, we might become anxious. No one wants to have a wrong view. I must, therefore, be quite cautious. The Sanskrit term *samyak,* "right," is translated rather interestingly into Tibetan as *yang dakpa. Dakpa* means pure, and *yang* can have the sense of over and over again (*yang yang*), like a process of refining, so as to get to the quintessence. It's like a view that is completely pure or has been completely purified.

A completely pure view will help us discern and stabilize being on the path. Therefore, study and practice are ways of purifying our view. So rather than "wrong view," we might say instead "view that is still in need of purification." It is good to remember that right view is listed first in the list of the eightfold noble path. Given their profound nature and importance in the foundational insights of the Buddha, each one of these eight aspects of the path could be studied separately for a long time; one could, perhaps, even spend a year in retreat reflecting on each one of them.

Completely Pure Thought

Pure thought is what is in accord with right view regarding that which impedes and that which promotes engaging in the path whose destination is the cessation of all suffering.

Completely Pure Effort

We don't simply have views and thoughts; we have intentions and we engage in effortful activities. Even if we're a really lazy person, we have to make some effort in our laziness, in our diversions, right? In fact, it is very difficult to be completely lazy. Luyipa, one of the eighty-four *mahasiddhas* celebrated in the Indian Tantric Buddhist tradition, is said to have made his spiritual attainments (*siddhis*) great (*maha*) by maintaining his laziness with tremendous effort and no distraction. It's not so easy. The point here is that study and practice take a great deal of confident effort. We are encouraged to develop a habit of such pure effort.

Completely Pure Mindful Reflection

Pure mindfulness is a broad subject. The main point, which subsequent Buddhist writings have greatly expanded upon, is the cultivation of "mindfulness" (*smriti*), meaning "not drifting away from the chosen object of concentration (*alambana*)," and "alertness" (*samprajanya*), meaning becoming alert to when one has drifted away from concentrated focus and then returning to the object of contemplation. These days, there are numerous mindfulness-based practices that have been adapted for use in secular contexts and whose main aim, it seems, is to reduce stress and anxiety. These modern practices are rather effective at stress reduction, but they have been criticized by more traditional Buddhist teachers (and their followers) for not being in full accord with the Buddhist eightfold path. That is, they seem to be ends in themselves, and they are not geared toward the Buddhist goal of the complete cessation of suffering. What can one say about this? Such is the current state of things.

Completely Pure Speech

When we talk about wholesomeness and unwholesomeness, right and wrong action, there's this famous list of the ten unwholesome factors: three for body and three for mind, and, interestingly, four for speech.[9] Maybe with respect to our habits of expressing ourselves, a little bit of extra purification is necessary? What are those four wholesome speech actions? They are (1) to renounce lying, (2) to give up sowing discord, (3) to abandon harsh speech, and (4) to renounce worthless chatter.

Completely Pure Conduct

Pure conduct is how we are with others. Are we promoting a sense of well-being or not?

Completely Pure Livelihood

Pure livelihood refers to how we make our living. The Buddha cautions his followers to refrain from accepting pay for particular occupations that may bring harm to others or for producing objects that result in increasing the pain and suffering of others.

Completely Pure Meditation

Pure meditation, the last in the list of the eightfold path, refers to practices which deepen the inquiry into the nature of reality (*samadhi*). They are meant not as an end in themselves but rather to aid one along the path to the cessation of suffering.

This eightfold path has been likened to a wheel with four spokes. The first four of these eight aspects of the path—completely pure view, thought, effort, and mindful reflection—are likened to four spokes of a wheel. Three of these aspects of the path—completely pure speech, conduct, and livelihood—are the hub of a wheel. The circumference, the rim of the wheel, is the aspect of completely pure meditation. All eight factors, then, need to be in place or the wheel will not properly turn.

PART ONE

The Abhidharma and How It Relates to Our World

1

What Is the Abhidharma?

> In Sanskrit, *Abhi* means "making manifest." *Dharma,* in this case, means "what can be known or cognized," "the plurality of factors of reality," or simply "what there is."

Somebody could say, "Why bother? Why should I care about knowing how to directly perceive reality?" That is an excellent question. The point of the Buddhist teachings is that the direct perception of reality is necessary in order to be truly free. Our capacity to learn how to directly perceive reality is the *sine qua non* for traversing the path, without which one cannot be truly free. In fact, how free we are depends on how directly we perceive reality.

Of course, these days in the West any talk of a true reality is regarded by many as rather suspect. There are those who would say, "It's a matter of opinion," "One man's meat is another man's poison," or "Life is just as you like"—anything goes. This is what the Buddha calls nihilistic. So this notion of "the direct perception of reality" is, perhaps, the most important definition of Abhidharma.

There are three aspects to this definition: the first aspect is making manifest. You could do a whole study of Buddhism in terms of what is manifest and what is not yet manifest. The second aspect is direct perception. The third is this famous reality. In Tibetan it is called *de kho na nyi,* "just what is."

The Seventy-Five Dharmas

Now, to further elaborate on dharmas as "factors of reality" or "what there is," there is a list of seventy-five dharmas (see this page). We could look at it like we would a periodic table of elements with all the different atoms, from hydrogen through einsteinium. There are lightweight atoms and heavyweight atoms, each with their own characteristics, their own quantum spin (at the level of quarks), and

their own capacity to engage in conditional relations with other atoms to make molecules. These molecules combine with other molecules to make bigger molecules. And sometimes, as with carbon, an atom continues making long strings called polymers, such as plastics, which we may later use as a plastic bottle.

We can see polymers in their functional aspect, as, for instance, a plastic bottle, but we don't see the molecular structure of the polymer itself. This distinction between the way things really are and the way they appear is crucial and is a distinction that is elaborated upon in the Abhidharma (and in subsequent) literature. It is said that the listing and understanding of the various factors of existence and their interactions is, in fact, the way things are. It is, however, difficult to be aware at the level of the flowing interactions of the dharmas themselves. We shall see that Vasubandhu, following the traditions he studied in Gandhara, found it more amenable to classify the seventy-five basic factors of existence into a grouping of eighteen elements (*dhatus*) or, in another grouping, as twelve sense bases (*ayatanas*). At the level of the way things actually are, not only in Western science but also in Abhidharma, there is an understanding that there is a fundamental plurality of different energy patterns, which in Western science, until recently, we called an "atom," meaning "not divisible." *Atom* is simply a word for a fundamental pattern of energy. Of course, nowadays, we say that not even the atom is so fundamental. What are the current and most fundamental building blocks that make up atoms? They are called quarks, which have rather wonderful names: *beauty, strangeness,* and *charm*.

In a similar way, the Abhidharma tradition has a very subtle and precise way of presenting what makes up our entire world, both physically and non-physically, perceptually, cognitively, somatically, physiologically, and so on. The equivalent to this atom (or quark) in the Abhidharma world is called a dharma. The study of the Abhidharma can be understood as consisting of becoming learned about both the essential features of these dharmas and also how these dharmas work together.

Why should that be of importance to us? It is important because, just as in the study of physics, the study of the Abhidharma also shows the basic factors of existence and the basic laws that regulate their coming together. This makes up the entirety of what we call so casually and imprecisely "my world," "my life," "my emotions," "my thoughts," and so on. It is not as we would like it to be, or think it ought to be, or hope that someday it will be, but is precisely as it is and has always been.

Abhidharma study, then, moves us from the imprecise language of thoughts, emotions, feelings, intuitions, and desires into the precise language of the coming together and uncoming together of dharmas, in this case, seventy-five dharmas, which are discussed and categorized rather like an atomic chart of basic factors of existence.

The Importance of Precision

These days, of course, most people who call themselves Buddhists don't know the names of these various aspects of reality. We might be inspired by the teachings, recite the sutras for inspiration, or even do some practices of the Vajrayana

traditions, or maybe we simply pray for blessings from the teachers. But if someone asks us questions about the precise meaning of the words we use to characterize our understanding and our experiences, our confidence may become rather shaky.

There are many styles for engaging the Buddhadharma. For instance, there is the style of studying and learning—in addition to practice—how to be more precise, in a spacious way, with our capacity to make distinctions. His Holiness the Dalai Lama and many other great Buddhist teachers have stressed the precise, almost "scientific" mode of the Buddhist teachings. It does not contradict the other mode that involves faith-based practice with an open heart. In fact, many teachers have stressed the benefit of bringing both modes together.

Some people love the feeling of the Dharma but don't like to study precise words used in the authoritative texts. Others love the precise words, but if they are invited to open their heart in a ritual context, they feel they are following some cult. Perhaps it is good to find the right balance.

The *Treasury of Higher Dharma*

The first turning of the wheel of the Dharma consisted of the teaching on the four noble truths, the teaching on proper conduct, and the teaching on the four mindfulnesses as found in the Pali *Satipatthana Sutta*[10] and in the Sanskrit *Sutra on Establishing Mindfulness* (*Smrityupasthana Sutra*).[11] *Smriti* is a Sanskrit word for mindfulness.

On the basis of that first turning, those who came after the Buddha made commentaries. It is in this context that the great scholar Vasubandhu—the half-brother of Asanga and one of the great jewels of India—wrote a magnificent work called the *Treasury of Higher Dharma* or the *Abhidharmakosha*.[12]

As mentioned before, Vasubandhu himself merely summarized all the different streams of Abhidharma teachings that existed at the time that he lived (in the fourth to fifth centuries of the Common Era) in the area of Gandhara (present-day Kashmir). Tradition recounts that Vasubandhu gathered all the different views extant at that time, and on the basis of those views he would lecture all day. After his lecture, he would go home and summarize that lecture by composing one *karika,* a four-lined summary verse. We have these lines of text in Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, French, and English.[13] On the basis of those summary verses, he then compiled them into almost five hundred verses, called the *Verses That Contain the Treasury of the Abhidharma* (*Abhidharmakosha-karikas*).

Verses and Commentary

After Vasubandhu wrote these verses, he then wrote a commentary (*bhasya*) on them. The verses and commentary together are called the *Abhidharmakoshabhashya*.[14] *Kosha*[15] means "treasury," and treasure means something of great value. Remember that these verses together with their extensive commentary composed by Vasubandhu is considered an encyclopedic "treasure" of information on how to make manifest the direct perception of reality. It contains an account of all the possible interactions between the basic factors of existence,

the dharmas.

According to tradition, one would memorize the verses (*karikas*).[16] When I first heard "verses," I thought, "It's poetry." But actually they are very terse and condensed verses, with almost no grammar, and you can barely make sense of it. In the living traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, monastics memorize these verses simply as a mnemonic device. They aren't meant to make sense of the verses by themselves.

In his commentary Vasubandhu explains what each particular dharma, or factor of reality, means. Then he tells us that some thinkers in the tradition have different views on the meanings of some key points. Often Vasubandhu cites the names of the people who posed certain questions or objections. And then we have Vasubandhu's response to the effect of, "Ah, so you say. But in truth this is based on the following error of your thinking…" He does this not to shame the person asking the question but rather to sharpen the sword of their capacity to note distinctions relevant to the wide variety of specific points.

Discernment

In fact, what is being exercised and what is working here is one out of the seventy-five factors, or dharmas, the one we call "discernment" (*prajna*).[17] The discussion of prajna that comes from the *Abhidharmakosha* states that it is itself a "dharma," a factor of reality, which is present as the capacity to make fine, precise distinctions with respect to the nature and functions of all other factors. It is that special dharma that makes it possible to have knowledge of all the other dharmas—to have precise knowledge of the other dharmas. The Sanskrit phrase that defines this discernment is *dharmanam pravichaya*.[18] In this book, following along with Vasubandhu, we will be exploring our own capacity for discernment in order to clarify the meanings of the variety of distinctions that account for the multiplicity of our experiences.

Other Traditions of Abhidharma: No Conflict

The basis for our discussions of Higher Dharma are teachings based on what in the Tibetan Buddhist traditions are classified within the so-called first turning of the wheel of the Dharma; it is the so-called Way of the Listeners (Shravakayana), or sometimes classified as the "Hinayana" (the Lesser Way), which does not delve into Greater Way (Mahayana) formulations of similar topics.

The main text that was studied by Tibetan Buddhists for so-called Mahayana Abhidharma is the *Compendium of the Higher Teaching* (*Mahayana Abhidharmasamuccaya*),[19] a text attributed to Vasubandhu's half-brother Asanga. The approach of Vasubandhu, which we follow here in this book, contains seventy-five dharmas, whereas the Mahayana approach contains one hundred dharmas. There is, however, no real contradiction in approach.

Although we follow the listing of seventy-five dharmas in this book, it is not the only way. The nineteenth to twentieth-century Tibetan master Ju Mipham

Rinpoche, in his *Gateway to Knowledge,* discusses ten expert knowledges mentioned in Maitreya's *Discriminating between the Extremes and the Middle* (*Madhyantavibhaga*). And then, in accord with this schema, he engages in a presentation of these dharmas, combining both Shravakayana and Mahayana definitions of them.

The point here is that whether one studies the *Abhidharmakosha* of Vasubandhu or the *Abhidharmasamuccaya* of Asanga, or both, there are no major contradictions. The lists are somewhat different, but the basic dynamic principles are the same: everything is dharmas, and they can be divided into conditioned and unconditioned dharmas. Both the Shravakayana and the Mahayana Abhidharma accept that. And both the Shravakayana and the Mahayana Abhidharma agree that conditioned means arising due to causes and conditions and being subject to dissipation; both approaches accept that reality is an unconditioned state, not subject to causes and conditions.

The Mind Is Sharpened by Clear and Distinct Definitions

In the great Indian traditions of study, one makes concrete lists and then goes very carefully by the list. This is not to say that Indians were interested in collecting lists, but it was felt—as a matter of pedagogy—that the mind is sharpened by having very clear and distinct definitions that precisely orient the mind and attention. These definitions were thought to be necessary in order to truly hit the target referred to.

For example, in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher,* Patrul Rinpoche speaks of three defects, six stains, and five wrong ways of remembering when you study. The five wrong ways of remembering are:

1. Remembering the words but forgetting the meaning
2. Remembering the meaning but forgetting the words
3. Remembering both but with no understanding
4. Remembering them out of order
5. Remembering them incorrectly[20]

He says it's not enough to come out of a teaching and say, "It was such a great teaching, it was so profound. The teacher was so inspiring." But then when asked what was said, you reply, "Oh, it doesn't matter, it was just so inspiring." According to Patrul Rinpoche, this is a defect. Having a defect doesn't mean we're going to hell or we're going into a deep precipice and never returning. It just means it will delay us a bit on our way to directly perceiving reality. This way of going through lists is meant to help sharpen the intellect.

The Four Categories of Butön

Those who knew the Dharma very well thought that perhaps this word *dharma* was the deepest and most important word of all. The great Tibetan Buddhist

scholar Butön (1290–1364) wrote a magnificent work called *A History of Buddhism*[21] and was instrumental in compiling the first widely available Tripitaka, the collection of the Buddha's teachings. In doing this, he closely studied the variety of available texts. In his *History of Buddhism,* he divides the discussion of the meaning of this key word *dharma* into four sections:

1. Different referents for the term *dharma*
2. The etymology of the word *dharma*
3. The definitions of dharma
4. The variety of types of dharma in the sense of Buddhist teachings

1. Dharma as Referents: Ten Referents by Vasubandhu

Butön's first section is called "Different Referents for the Word *Dharma*." Here, Butön quotes Vasubandhu. In addition to the *Abhidharmakosha,* Vasubandhu also wrote a text called the *Proper Mode of Exposition,*[22] in which he laid out a number of distinctions about the Dharma. The Tibetans in particular fastened on to one section of this work, wherein he lists ten different senses in which the word *dharma* is used. For each referent, Vasubandhu gives the definition and then quotes how the word *dharma* is used in the Buddhist context. It's very concrete. Just to hear this makes us appreciate the nuances of the multiple ways in which this word *dharma* is used. According to Vasubandhu, *dharma* can mean a number of things:

1. What can be known or cognized:[23] Dharma is the plurality of factors of reality, as in the expression, "dharmas are conditioned or unconditioned."
2. The path to liberation itself:[24] This meaning is represented in the expression, "Dharma is completely pure view."
3. Nirvana:[25] We observe this meaning in the expression, "I seek refuge in the Dharma."

   Interestingly, Vasubandhu says, in its true sense, this expression means full and complete enlightenment, nirvana.
4. Mental object:[26] There are certain things which are a "dharma basis."[27] This is a technical term that refers to whatever is exclusively an object for the mind itself and does not depend on sense fields; that is, it is not an object for visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, or tactile perception.
5. Merit:[28] This is exemplified in the expression, "They behaved in accord with the Dharma."
6. This life:[29] This meaning is conveyed in the sentence, "Worldly beings are attached to this present life, to worldly dharma." Dharma in the sense of worldly dharma means precisely, from the Buddhist viewpoint, to only have regard for this life as it is, with no thought for lives to come, no thought for the karmic implications, and so on.
7. Teachings of the Buddha:[30] This is expressed in the quote, "The Dharma consists of Sutra, Vinaya, Abhidharma, and so on." There are twelve divisions of that.
8. What is subject to change or aging:[31] This is observed in the sentence, "This

body is endowed with the dharma of aging."

9. Religious vow:[32] This is dharma in the sense of an intention to lead one's life in accord with ethical norms, in the sense of "the four dharmas of a monk or a nun."
10. Worldly custom:[33] This is dharma in the sense of cultural conditioning, as in the expression, "The dharma of that country, the dharma of those people."

In this book we will focus primarily on "dharma as what we can know" (definition 1) as well as "Dharma as teachings of the Buddha" (definition 7). To distinguish these two, we will capitalize the word *Dharma* when it refers to the Buddha's teachings.

2. Etymology of "Dharma"

How is the Sanskrit word *dharma* formed? There's a general sense and a special sense. The general sense comes from the root *dhir*,[34] which means to uphold, to maintain, to support, or to sustain.

The special sense is *saddharma*[35]—highest, supreme, or sublime Dharma; that is, Dharma as the highest teachings, Dharma as applied to Buddhism. Because saddharma—the sublime Dharma, the Buddhadharma, the teachings of the Buddha and his heirs—is so important, there is a list of three different senses of saddharma:

1. The Dharma of the Buddha,[36] the one whose teaching is supreme
2. The Dharma that is the supreme[37] Dharma applied to Buddhism (In this sense, *sad,* supreme, and *dharma* are appositional, the same)
3. The Dharma for the supreme ones,[38] those who are blessed and temporarily flexible enough in their hearts and minds to take the teachings seriously into their lives (This is the most important sense of saddharma for us here)

3. Dharma as a Buddhist Teaching

In the *Abhidharmakosha,* Vasubandhu says that saddharma as a Buddhist teaching is twofold:

1. Dharma as a means of conveying, called "Dharma of scriptures"[39]
2. Dharma as understanding itself, called "Dharma of realization"[40]

There's the means of conveying through text (and text here means whatever medium is used to convey the teachings)—the Dharma as means. And there is also Dharma as end result, as realization, as full and complete understanding; it is that which this "means" is aiming at.

4. Variety of Dharma Teachings

The fourth category of Butön is the variety of types of dharma in terms of teachings. They are:

1. The three turnings of the wheel of Dharma
2. The teachings in all their multiplicity and variety; if they are Buddhadharma,

they are of unique taste[41]

What's special and precious about the Buddhadharma is that it is wholesome, good, and in accord with reality. It is said a superior practitioner, upon merely hearing the name of a Buddhist text, can completely realize the essence of that teaching. The less capable have to descend to studying the contents. That's why titles are given such wonderful names: because there's a *tendrel*[42] here, an auspiciousness in the name. Buddhadharma is considered to have the special quality or flavor of being good in the very beginning, in the middle, and even at the end. This is the case because it is said to accord with reality. That's one sense of what's unique about such teachings.

To return to the term unique or one taste," what is this taste? It's said to be unique, wonderful, and good. It is said to have the taste of liberation (*vimoksha*) itself.[43] Every word of the Dharma, if it is truly Dharma, and every combination of the words has the true, invariant taste of leading to liberation. This is the traditional view that motivates Buddhists to study the works of the Buddha and the commentaries, and to put them into practice so as to achieve the goal of complete liberation from suffering. Thus, when one studies and practices, one should never disparage or become impatient with respect to the sublime Dharma.

Needless to say, the above perspectives represent what anthropologists call an "emic" perspective—that is, an "insider" perspective that accords with those attitudes held by practitioners within the Buddhist traditions. There are, of course, "outsider" perspectives, "etic" approaches, which are, for the most part, the approach of so-called academic, historical accounts of Buddhism.

In the Shravakayana traditions, they say that although the Buddha is no more, one yearns to see the living presence of the Buddha. The Buddha, anticipating this concern, was said to have declared, "Whoever sees the Dharma sees me." The Buddha, as the one who shows the way, is fully present and complete in and as the Dharma.

Discernment (Prajna): The Dharma That Makes It Possible to Know Dharmas

How can these teachings be good in this way? They are good because we ourselves are fundamentally good. We are fundamentally wholesome; therefore, we are entirely capable of accessing that free, open, and boundless ground of goodness. And we do so by learning what to accept and what to reject in accord with our natural capacity to nurture the roots of goodness, what Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche called our basic sanity.[44]

What is the name for the capacity to do this? In Sanskrit the term that is used is *prajna*. We've already discussed the importance of this factor of existence, this dharma. You might be familiar with prajna from the prajnaparamita[45] ("wisdom that has gone beyond") literature such as the *Heart Sutra,* which is well known in Zen Buddhism. In this context, prajna means "wisdom," but here in these Abhidharma contexts, it means "discernment," our capacity to note distinctions that are important for our quality of life, our capacity to nurture the roots of our own basic goodness. Remember, this is a definition that comes from the *Abhidharmakosha*. Remember that prajna is one of the factors of experience and

is defined as the capacity to precisely discern the nature of the factors of existence.[46] To re-emphasize this crucial point, here "prajna" is one dharma that has as its definition the capacity to know dharmas. We might think of it as the gossamer thread connecting us to our buddha nature.

The application of discerning factors of reality is part of the path—combining both view and practice together. What, then, is involved in applying or bringing out this prajna?

1. There is prajna in terms of how to listen.[47]
2. There is prajna in terms how to reflect on what was heard.[48]
3. There is prajna in terms of meditation—how to go deeply with what one has reflected on.[49]

There is a famous list about how to properly listen, reflect, and deepen—the so-called four reliances—that is enumerated in the *Explanation of the Profound Secrets Sutra* (*Samdhinirmochana Sutra*).[50] The list reads:

1. Rely on the Dharma that is being spoken and not the person speaking.
2. Rely on the true sense and not the mere words.
3. Rely on the definitive, stable meaning and not the provisional, contextual meaning.
4. Rely on the primordial wisdom aspect and not the intellectual, perceptual aspect.

At this point, one might ask, "What is so special or higher about the Abhidharma?" Traditionally there are four different meanings for "higher" (*abhi*) in the word *abhidharma*:

1. Making manifest:[51] Abhidharma is a way of study and practice that manifests the direct experience of reality. This is the main characteristic of "*abhi*."
2. Doing something over and over again repeatedly:[52] This is Abhidharma repeatedly and in various ways showing the different groupings of the factors of experience (the five aggregates, twelve sources, eighteen elements, etc.).
3. Surpassing or dominating:[53] Here, *abhi* means that by knowing the particular and generic aspects of these dharmas, these factors of existence—by knowing the specific, concrete characteristics as well as the multiplicity and general patterns of reality—one will be able to surpass the views of one's philosophical adversaries. Here, the primary philosophical adversary that we may want to surpass is not outside us; it is our temporary tendencies toward "wrong view." This is not like waging war outside. This is a way of surpassing our wrong views and limited patterns and conclusively dominating, settling, and stabilizing all doubts and controversy regarding spiritual practice.
4. Complete comprehension or realization:[54] This is *abhi* in the sense of having full comprehension of everything whatsoever, which we are told consists of those things that are actual and those things that are only mental constructs.

2

Everything Is Dharmas

Which Way Will the Frogs Jump?

My task in this book is to convince you that Abhidharma study and practice, which is often considered boring and just lists of lists, can actually be enlivening and loads of fun. Here is the analogy: There is a barrel of frogs here, and, at the moment, the barrel is closed. If we feel there is some movement there, maybe we are afraid or maybe we are interested in those frogs inside. My task in this book might be likened to opening the barrel and gently spilling out the frogs and then encouraging you to feel confident that, judging by the type of frog, you know which way it is going to jump. And then, of course, the big surprise is to remind you that these frogs and the way they jump are us.

We have a habit of saying, "There is a problem" or "I have a problem." But the first problem is "I." "I am a problem." "I think, therefore there is a problem" or, as some would put it, "I think, therefore I think I am." In the Buddhist tradition they call this an unwarranted inference.

Just because we think, we should not imagine that this corresponds to an "I." Our understanding of reality gets us through the day, but in reality, what is it made of? Why should we take any interest in that? Just as in the example of carbon atoms that can be arranged in long chains called polymers to take the shape of a plastic bottle, we might think, "It's enough to have the plastic bottle, isn't it? Why bother learning about polymers?" But maybe, if we know what that bottle is made of, we can change its form and discover how to mold plastics for other uses.

In fact, just to think of dharmas as many different things already brings an increase of mental space. One sign of mental spaciousness and being relaxed is the capacity to laugh. It is difficult to maintain a narrow mental view and laugh at the same time. You might try it; it's very difficult, right? One of the epithets of the Buddha is He Who Can Laugh. He was also called the Great Analyzer.[55]

My task here is to show you that learning how to analyze the seemingly chaotic

and jumping-around nature of our thoughts might be likened to opening the lid of a box containing lots of frogs. Maybe we can learn to laugh while we investigate the nature those unruly "frogs."

Sarvam Dharmam: Everything Is Dharmas

We shall now finally delve into the list of the seventy-five different mental and emotional factors (chart 1) according to the Abhidharma. These are the categories of all different kinds of dharmas and how, like wild frogs, they jump about. According to the Abhidharma, these dharmas and their patterns of interactive behavior make up all of life: both "me" and "my world."

These basic factors of existence, these dharmas, constitute what truly exists in all of its particularity and variety. This list of seventy-five dharmas is regarded by the Higher Dharma tradition as comprehensive; it accounts for the entirety of our actual and possible existence. This is a total picture of everything that one needs to know in order to accomplish full and complete enlightenment. As mentioned before, everything is constituted by dharmas (in Sanskrit, this is expressed as *sarvam dharmam*).[56] This word *sarvam,* "everything," is used over and over again in the teachings of the Buddha. "Everything," here, means all-inclusive, nothing missing, a full and complete teaching.

Remember my previous question, "Why bother? Why don't we just open our hearts and rest? Isn't that what the teachings are all about?" Well, that's great if you can do it. These teachings seem to suggest, however, that opening to what is and resting in that is not so easy. There are many impediments, blockages, and doubts. There are so many contradictory thoughts and feelings.

THE SEVENTY-FIVE DHARMAS

CONDITIONED				UNCONDITIONED
I Forms	II Mind	III Concomitant Mental Factors	IV Elements Neither Substantial Forms Nor Mental Functions	
1. Eye 2. Ear 3. Nose 4. Tongue 5. Body 6. Form 7. Sound 8. Smell 9. Taste 10. Touch/Textures 11. Imperceptible Forms ("other")	12. Mind (*chitta*)	13.–22. General Factors 23.–32. Primary Wholesome Factors 33.–38. Primary Factors of Upset 39.–40. Primary Factors of Negativity 41.–50. Minor Factors of Upset 51.–58. Variable Factors	59. Acquisition 60. Nonacquisition 61. Similar Class 62. Perceptionless Serenity 63. State of Nonperception 64. Serenity of Cessation 65. Life 66. Birth 67. Fleeting Stability 68. Decay 69. Impermanence 70. Name 71. Word 72. Letter	73. Space 74. Cessation Due to Discrimination 75. Cessation Not Due to Discrimination

The Seventy-Five Dharmas according to the *Abhidharmakosha* (see appendix 1, column III, for a complete list of the factors and for the Sanskrit and Tibetan names)

In fact, the Higher Dharma names and catalogs those energies that block the heart from being open. One might say, then, that the study of what opens and what blocks the opening of the heart is the very core of the Abhidharma.

The Discernment of All Dharmas

Let's look at prajna, discernment, which is factor 18 from the list of seventy-five on the chart. We've already defined it as the dharma that allows us to *know* dharmas. In the *Abhidharmakosha* (chapter 1, verse 2a), Vasubhandu responds to the question, "What is Abhidharma?" by stating:

> Abhidharma is pure prajna with its following. Prajna...is the discernment of the dharmas.[57]

Even if you were to stop reading now, you would already have something wonderful. You would know that the Abhidharma, the highest teachings of the Dharma, consists precisely, and in an absolute way, of undefiled wisdom, as the capacity to know what arises *as it arises*. This knowledge is a treasure because it is this knowledge that leads us out of the mire of transmigration.[58] This is the absolute meaning of Abhidharma. Vasubhandu (*Abhidharmakosha*, chapter 1, verse 2b) also states:

> It is also prajna, and the treatise that brings about the obtaining of pure prajna.
>
> In common usage, the word Abhidharma also designates all prajna that brings about the obtaining of Abhidharma in the absolute sense of the word;...[59]

To paraphrase this, the word *Abhidharma* designates all discernment of dharmas, bringing about the Abhidharma. Remember, this word *abhi* means making manifest direct perception of reality as it is. *Prajna* is the name given to that which makes that manifest—the direct perception of reality as it is. Now we know something about Abhidharma in the absolute sense and something about Abhidharma as a treatise. In this sentence, Vasubandhu is using the term "Abhidharma" in both senses. Vasubandhu continues:

> ...defiled prajna whether it is innate or natural, or whether the result of an effort, the result of hearing, reflection, absorption, receives, along with its following, by convention, also the name Abhidharma.[60]

We also give the name Abhidharma to the way in which prajna works when it is not pure. That means Abhidharma and this treatise also talk about the way in which our capacity to note distinctions is defiled.

We have two senses of the word *prajna,* two ways in which we can discern the way things are: (1) purely, which allows us to directly perceive reality as it is, and (2) impurely (prajna in a defiled sense), which is the result of being caught up in effort due to hearing, thinking, absorbing, and so on, in an unclear way.

Dharma Bears Its Own Unique Characteristics

Vasubandhu continues: "Dharma is that which bears (dhārana) its own specific or unique characteristic." [61] This is one of the senses of the list of ten referents for the word *dharma*. What Vasubandhu indicates here is that each of these seventy-five dharmas has a specific, unique characteristic. Previously, we used the analogy of atoms and quarks. We don't say, "I think it was probably hydrogen, but maybe it was helium. I'm not sure. Anyway, there was a little bit of energy, and what does it matter?" We learn, instead, to know the precise characteristics of the atoms (or quarks and so on). It is rather the same with the dharmas. Precision is key.

There are concrete effects due to the specific workings of these various dharmas. Every love affair and every war can—at the level of analysis—be totally accounted for by these seventy-five dharmas. However, the Abhidharma is not studied in order to make a full account of every war and every love affair. However, it does help us to not be surprised when love affairs sometimes turn into a war. This is the nature of defiled dharmas, of defiled prajna.

Otherwise it's as if someone who is not a skilled doctor went into a room and engaged in a display of being shocked and disgusted by the full manifestations of the symptoms of an illness. Why are we shocked? Why are we surprised when someone gets upset? From the point of view and practice of the Abhidharma (and indeed the Buddhadharma), when conditions are ripe, upset occurs, and when

conditions are right, upset dissipates, and these conditions we can know—dharma is that which bears its own specific or unique characteristic.

To conclude this section, Vasubandhu writes:

> The Abhidharma is called *abhi-dharma* because it envisions [62] the dharma which is the direct object of supreme knowledge, or the supreme dharma, [which is] nirvana [itself].[63]

Conditioned and Unconditioned Dharmas

Let us examine the chart of the seventy-five dharmas. There are two great divisions in the chart:

1. Conditioned dharmas (1–72)
2. Unconditioned dharmas (73–75)

Conditioned Dharmas

The section on "Conditioned Dharmas" is divided into four major categories:

I. Forms, which consist of eleven specific dharmas
II. Mind, which consists of one dharma
III. Concomitant (or working together) mental factors, which are further divided into subgroups (see appendix 1, column III, for more details)
IV. Elements neither substantial forms (column I), nor involved in mental functioning (columns II and III), which consists of true factors that do not depend on a truth or reality in a present moment of experience (in other lists, these are presented like what we might call in physics "laws that regulate the coming together of dharmas")

We will spend most of our time exploring those dharmas listed in column III. We will address such questions as: What are the general factors of being alive? What are the factors that help open our heart? What are the factors that prevent us from opening our heart? What factors can be either opening or closing, depending on the situation? And we will explore those dharmas listed in column IV and address such questions as: What are the general laws that regulate this coming together and also their dissipation?

Unconditioned Dharmas

However, all of these seventy-two conditioned dharmas are rather beside the point if it wasn't for the very last column, those of the unconditioned dharmas, those factors which name the possibility of freedom and liberation from suffering. Without that, probably no one would be interested. In order to give a full picture of all the dharmas, in addition to the dharmas that come together and go apart, there are three dharmas that are not created and not conditioned. These include dharma 73, space itself.

In addition to space there are two ways to understand cessation of suffering

(*nirodha*), dharmas 74 and 75. One sense of cessation, that of cessation with remainder, refers to the awakening of the Buddha under the bodhi tree. The term *with remainder* is used to indicate that, although his defilements had ceased, the Buddha continued to teach and be seen and heard by many beings for over forty years. That is what is meant by "cessation with remainder." The other sense, dharma 75, "cessation without remainder," refers to the final nirvana (*parinirvana*), or "death," of the Buddha, which leaves no remainder.

The Coming Together of Dharmas

Remember, everything that occurs is due to the working of dharmas, so we might ask the questions, "How come all of these factors aren't always working together all the time? What has to happen in order for some factors to lock into place, and what has to happen for those factors to be unlocked and no longer be working? How does impermanence work, and how does language work?" The answer to these questions is listed in this fourth column.

To play the Abhidharma "game," this special mode of analysis, the answer has to be given in terms of dharmas. Then, to formulate the same question as an Abhidharma question, we might ask: "Which dharmas are responsible for the coming together of dharmas?" Just by hearing this, we move into the technical way in which an *Abhidharmika*—one who practices Abhidharma—thinks about these things.

Acquisition and Nonacquisition

The dharma responsible for the coming together of dharmas is 59: *acquisition*.[64] The dharma that is responsible for disengaging groupings of dharmas is 60: *nonacquisition*.[65]

Birth

The dharma that is responsible for the coming into existence of a situation is 66: *birth*.[66] Birth here does not mean birth from a mother but the coming about of a new situation. If you think about it, it is strange that something new can occur. We have this habit of saying, "I have a new boyfriend, a new girlfriend, a new job, a new teacher, a new understanding, a new kind of goat cheese, a new whatever." But that does not mean we understand its characteristics. From the viewpoint of dharmas, what is responsible for this experience of *newness*? It is 66: birth.

Fleeting Stability

The other strange thing about experiences is that they don't immediately dissipate. They seem to be stable for a while. If we have a new boyfriend or girlfriend, this is good news. If we are newly unemployed, this is bad news. But to give a full

presentation of a situation or experience, to say that it is new is not enough; it also sticks around for a while. In order to underline the impermanence of it, I call it *fleeting stability* (67).

For a while we are here, and the general characteristics of this "here" situation is the sole ground that makes scientific investigation possible. Think about it: if it were the nature of all reality to instantaneously arise and dissipate, it would be impossible to engage in that famous repetition of the experiment. There has to be a relatively similar situation, a stability, in order to communicate or investigate anything at all. In fact, it is one of the hallmarks of mental health.

When the stabilities of ourselves and another individual are not harmonious, when the rate of decay of remembering or reflecting is different among individuals, we say we're not compatible. It starts with something small like "The timing is a bit off here; it's incompatible." That is the "seed syllable" before we say, "There is a problem." And the full visualization of that samsaric practice is, "We must banish something." All of this comes from differences of stability.

That which is extremely unstable is often regarded as negative, as if there is some force that wants or desires things to be stable. We categorize things and situations as good or bad depending on their *stability*. If something is painful, it is good if it is extremely unstable. If something is pleasurable, it is bad if it is extremely unstable. However, no matter how stable it is, sooner or later it will completely dissipate in terms of its current pattern. It won't disappear, it *decays* (68); it undergoes a transformation to the point where its general characteristics are no longer appropriate as a full explanation.

And both in India and in the West, great and lesser philosophers have wondered about whether or not what has changed is the nature and essence, or only an accident, of its qualities. The fact that there seems to be a movement from dharmas called *birth* (66) to dharmas called *stability* (67) to dharmas called *decay* (68) is given the name *impermanence* as a separate dharma (69).

Impermanence

Impermanence is the name given to the fact that all conditioned elements (all elements from 1 to 72) arise, stay for a while, and then decay. This is that famous "impermanence." It is one of the marks of conditioned existence. In the Abhidharma, conditioned existence consists of seventy-two separate, analyzable factors. However, how do we usually understand "impermanence" in these contexts? Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche once asked why so many people think that impermanence is bad. He then suggested another way to think: Imagine that my current situation of not having a Mercedes-Benz is impermanent. Expanding this sense, we can think that our current situation of not being a full and complete buddha is actually impermanent!

3

Exploring the Nature of Self and Reality

Ourselves as a Stream

There is a great deal to study, and if we think this is boring and we don't have time, I can hear Vasubandhu's laughter because, from the viewpoint of the Abhidharma, these factors are what we see whenever we look into the mirror, this swirl of jumping frog potential.

If we feel embarrassed or if we laugh, all those passing moments of embarrassment, laughter, and boredom are completely accounted for as simply the coming together and the dissipation of dharmas. One moment we are embarrassed, the next we laugh, then we stop. This is what we are: a movement or a stream of unending "coming togethers" and "going aparts."

What is amazing, according to the Abhidharma and according to the Buddha, is that we as that stream can know the stream. That's fantastic news. There are only two ways the stream goes—knowing itself or not. Whether we study the Abhidharma or not, the stream will still flow.

In what follows, I'd like to say something about what it is to ignore the concrete subtlety of the various movements, why it is given such importance in the Buddhist teachings, what this has to do with self or ego, and why self or ego is considered the "bad guy" in Buddhism.

The Conditioned and the Unconditioned

But before addressing these very important questions, I'd like to revisit the distinction between the seventy-two conditioned dharmas and the three unconditioned dharmas. What do the terms *conditioned* and *unconditioned* mean? What do all of these seventy-two conditioned factors have in common, and how are they different from the three unconditioned dharmas? What does the "un" in

unconditioned—the *a* in the Sanskrit *asamskrita*[67]—mean? And again, why should we care about these "not" conditioned factors? Without knowing what unconditioned means, we do not know what cessation (of suffering) itself means. How do we know whether we have reached the end of the road? To ask the question about what is unconditioned is to ask the question about enlightenment itself.

Vasubandhu spends quite some time on this point, and he tells us that when he was studying, there were at least four separate schools and controversies on this one point about the meaning of conditioned in contrast to unconditioned.

Although Vasubandhu discusses four different ways of understanding the meaning of conditioned (*samskrita*) and not conditioned or unconditioned (*asamskrita*), he finally settled on what henceforth became the classical definition: "not" is taken to mean "not caused" (*ahetuka*).[68] Not conditioned or unconditioned means there was never anything that caused it to come about. Conditioned means, then, it does come about due to specific causes (*hetu*) and conditions (*pratyaya*).

Now we might think that the study of "causality," the dynamics of cause and effect in Buddhism, is the full and complete teaching. But we now learn that causality itself has absolutely nothing to do with those three not conditioned dharmas since they weren't caused. Think a bit: this might mean that we can't "produce" cessation, right? How can we produce a state that cannot be produced? How can we cause something that has no cause? Many thousands of pages have been written by Buddhists on this point, on this famous riddle of awakening—the cessation of conditioned factors.

Expressing Reality: Two Traditions

Now I would like to talk about a certain type of tightness. In the West, and according to some psychologists, *ego* is believed to be healthy and necessary, but in Buddhism ego seems to be not only unnecessary but "bad."

I Am That

In some of the noble traditions of India before Buddhism arose, there were treatises that spoke of a self (*atman*).[69] In Brahmanism, and later, in the so-called Hindu traditions, this self, or soul (there are various ways it has been rendered into English), is considered a "good guy"—that is, it is viewed as a very positive, spiritually important thing. Yet in most instances, we find that same term *atman* in Buddhist texts as a negative thing, a "bad guy," something to be seen through and abandoned. What I mean by "good guy" and "bad guy" here is that the word *atman* in Brahmanical/Hindu contexts refers to—in a very dynamic and subtle way—a spiritual insight into an invariant and dynamic way of being. In these traditions, *atman* signifies the most essential sense of what we are and *brahman*[70] refers to the invariant nature of the universe; it is the natural state of what is. These esoteric spiritual traditions of Hinduism consist of the investigation of how to discover and live in the light of seeing the identity between *atman* and *brahman*, but in Buddhist traditions, *atman* is regarded as a fixation that, when clung to (*atmagraha*), actually serves as the primary cause of suffering. So, in

short, "self" (*atman*) is "good" in Hindu traditions, but "bad" in Buddhist traditions.

This identification is encoded in the famous expression *tat tvam asi* from the Upanishads, which in archaic English is translated as "that thou art." That is to say, it means something akin to "I am that," "you are that." The "that" is brahman and the "I" or "Thou" is atman—and they are the same. This very famous expression is considered a quintessential truth of the Upanishads.

The Buddha of course was not born a Buddhist. He was a member of the Shakya clan and said to have been of the warrior (*kshatriya*) caste. He lived some five hundred years or so after the Upanishads were said to have developed, so he surely knew the traditions of the famous brahman and atman very well. But he also seems to have known of another famous tradition of the Upanishads, one that is less quoted by Buddhists when they want to show the differences between Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions: We refer here to the Upanishadic phrase regarding the ultimate that is "not that, not that" (*neti neti*).

Not That, Not That

Many scholars feel that there is an "apophatic" tradition of Upanishadic thinking which was very sympathetic to a line of teachings developed by the Buddha, a tradition in which one would search for what is most basic in the universe and discover that it wasn't "that." This "negative" use of language regarding the ultimate did not mean there did not exist any such thing as "the ultimate," but rather that one could not express what "it" might be in language.

This approach suggests there's an acknowledgment of the limits of naming what is most fundamental, a recognition that what is most fundamental cannot be named. All the names for this so-called fundamental nature can never hit the target of what is most fundamental because it is boundless; that is, it cannot be bound by language. In time, this way of reflecting grew into a tradition in the Upanishads. In time, a slogan developed that is as famous as *tat tvam asi*. It is the statement that whatever we think is "it" is not "it." This came to be expressed as *neti neti,* "not that, not that."

Thus, there were these two traditions of thought prior to Buddha's awakening—the tradition of "that thou art" (*tat tvam asi*) and the tradition of "not that, not that" (*neti neti*). Both were understood to have the same target—reality. Both traditions of characterizing what is absolutely real still exist today, not only in India but also in Buddhist traditions throughout the world. Some say we can positively characterize what is absolutely real; others suggest that we can use language only in a "negative" way to indicate the limits of language in the presence of what is absolutely real.

The Four Extremes

In the tradition of apophatic discourse—using negative language that points to the absolute nature of reality—there came to be Nagarjuna's famous exposition of four extremes.[71] They are:

1. Do things truly exist? Can we assert something truly exists? No.
2. Do things truly not exist? If we can't say that things truly exist, then surely we can assert that they must not exist. Can we say things truly do not exist? No.
3. Do things sometimes both exist and not exist? Perhaps sometimes things truly are and sometimes they truly aren't; perhaps they are both. This famous third option was subject to various interpretations. One way of interpreting "both" here is in a temporal sense: So it is the case that it *sometimes* is and *sometimes* isn't? Again, Nagarjuna says "No."
4. Do things never sometimes exist and not exist? Then, it must be the case that we can assert with certainty that it truly *is the case* that it never sometimes is and sometimes isn't? Again, Nagarjuna says "No."

Note in particular that the "not being able to establish" is not the same as establishing the opposite case.

These are the famous four extremes, and they can be regarded as a robust or turbocharged version of *neti neti*. Because of such talk, many people think that the essence of Buddhism is essentially *apophatic,* and some think that the essence of Christianity is *cataphatic,* as if there was no "not like that" tradition in Christianity, nor anything similar to "God is love" in Buddhism.

Misunderstanding Self, Soul, and Ego in Buddhism

We've spent a bit of time talking about self and ego in the tradition of the Upanishads because this kind of talk is extremely important in the Buddhist tradition. But since most of the early figures who translated the words of the Buddha into Western languages were conditioned by Christian thinking, we find absurd translations and thoughts such as "Buddhists say there's no such thing as a soul, ego, or self."

Perhaps to skirt these confusions, His Holiness the Dalai Lama says over and over again that the essence of all religions is love. I myself have never heard him give a teaching at an ecumenical conference in which he said there are two kinds of spiritual traditions: those who think (deludedly) that there is a soul and those who know (definitively) that there is no soul. But many people seem to take this business of the existence or nonexistence of the soul as a matter of life and death.

In Buddhism, there is the habit of saying that those who think that there is something called a soul or God suffer the wrong view or the extreme known as "eternalism." On the other side, of course, those for whom the word *soul* or *God* is an opening—an ethical, kind, and loving word—think, "Oh, those Buddhists, those nihilists, those God-denying heathens, who pay no attention to the salvation and loving-kindness of our Lord, they are to be pitied; they are to be converted; they are to be shunned." To summarize: this simple word *soul* has caused great confusion.

Obsessive Fixity

The Buddhist meaning of the word *atman* is "obsessive fixity." [72] Now you might ask, "What does this have to do with the famous ego?" Let's explore how this famous self and ego as a "good guy" or a "bad guy" is used in Buddhism.

Let's look again at the four noble truths. The cause of suffering is said to be clinging (*trishna,* literally "thirst").[73] Take the metaphors of Buddhism in all of their concrete splendor. *Trishna* means you are suffering from thirst—you are so dehydrated that you obsessively think only of the one thing that will alleviate your thirst—as if you were dying; all you can fixate on is finding water. In the desert you might even hallucinate its presence; the thirst is so strong that it might produce a hallucination, and the name of that hallucination, according to the Buddha, is that there is a self (atman). According to this metaphor, because this is based on an obsession, which is the cause for the continuation of suffering, this sense of atman is taken as something "bad," as discussed before,

According to Buddhist teachings, we thirst (trishna) in three different ways, and *atman* is the name given to the obsessive quality of our thirsting—to our obsessive fixity. I use the word *atman* here to avoid its translation as ego, soul, and self. *Atman* is just a word that's used to talk about any of the three following kinds of obsessions that are the cause of suffering:

1. We want certain things to be permanent, to not change.
2. We want something to be unique, to have never happened before.
3. We want things to be independent, not depending on anything.

We regard, obsess, or plan about things as if they were permanent (or stable), unique, and independent—hence all the practices on impermanence. Impermanence here refers back to our three friends from column IV (refer to the seventy-five dharmas chart on this page): birth (66), stability (67), and decay (68).

A perfect example for taking things as unique or singular is thinking of only this life. But if we think of dependent co-arising in terms of carrying over the course of many lives, we can think of things differently, that is, subject to change and dependently arisen. This famous metaphor is used by Nagarjuna in a text known as *Letter to a King*.[74] Here, Nagarjuna tells a king that if he had insight into how many lives he had already undergone, and were to make a heap of the bones from each of those previous lives, that mountain of bones would be higher than Mount Meru.

And finally, we want things to be independent as opposed to dependently arisen. Many types of meditation seem to be specific antidotes for this habit in which, thirsting and hungering for some certainty, we grab on to something as if it were permanent. As an exercise we can imagine that our close companions—perhaps a boyfriend or girlfriend—have a "past" of many previous lives, and if their bones were right now piled in front of us they would make a heap taller than the tallest of mountains. Yes, still, we want things to be stable, to be unique, and independent.

So, to summarize this important point, in Buddhism "self" (atman) is the name given to any or all of these three tendencies toward fixation. That's the technical definition. From this perspective we might see how "ego," "me," and "myself" are simply habitual tendencies of fixation. We cling to these static notions of ourselves and of others. You can see how ego and self are a bit secondary. It is said, in fact,

that we grab on to this.[75] We might call it "static cling"!

Cutting Through the Fixity: Anatman

It is said when we begin to have insight into this obsessive clinging as the primary dynamic of suffering, then the quality of that clinging begins to break up a bit. There are two ways in which the breakup of that clinging is indicated. We will primarily focus on only one of these ways: no self, which in Sanskrit is *anatman*.[76]

This famous anatman is an insight that, according to the Tibetan tradition, has been called the basic Shravakayana insight. It defines, in part, what is meant by Shravakayana. There is a certain level of insight into how this atman works, so that it loosens up a bit with respect to being a "person,"[77] which is Sanskrit for "my sense of who I am," "my personality", "me."

When we say, "I have a problem," "I" is already the problem. Who is this "I"? Is this person really permanent? Or is it not so solid or fixed? Many Buddhist practices have as their aim coming to experience this so-called person as not so permanent, unique, or independent.

In fact, personhood and personality is not so fixed. All the categories of the conditioned dharmas (the five aggregates,[78] the twelve sense bases,[79] and the eighteen elements) [80] are the impermanent, multiple, dependently arising factors that give a full account of this so-called me and my so-called world of experience, allowing it to not be so fixed. And the benefit—what we gain—is that the upset, the veil that masks our true openheartedness, is cut through. The veil of upset is ripped asunder. By applying the analysis of these Abhidharma categories, in groupings of five, twelve, and eighteen dharmas, we will see that this so-called "me" is not so fixed. The benefit is that one can rip the obscuring veil of upset when things don't go our way.

Arhat: To Have Conquered the Enemy

To conclude this section, the name given to that stable state in which the veil of upset has been thoroughly cut through (*klesha avarana*)—the goal according to the Shravakayana tradition—is said to be the state of being an arhat, a noble one, one who has conquered the foe of emotional upset. Arhat is glossed as foe destroyer.[81] It is said that through this basic practice of seeing through the fixity of the personality, one cuts through the crippling effects of emotional upset so that you have slain this enemy. The enemy is upset itself.

Stuckness of Habit Patterns

In these Buddhist traditions and also in Western forms of psychotherapy meant to help those whose ego has been damaged, the damage is understood to be an inability based on a kind of *stuckness of patterns*. The point is not to be stuck, and to learn how to become unstuck. What, then, would Buddhists say about the

Western notion of the necessity of having a "healthy ego"? A healthy ego from the Abhidharma point of view consists entirely of having stabilized those conditioned factors in that category called *wholesome factors* or *positive mental factors*. These include factors such as confidence, self-respect, decorum, equanimity, and so on.

The Buddhist View of Personality

If you ask a Buddhist what the Buddhist view of personality is, there are possibly two extreme responses. One extreme response would be, "There is no such thing as personality." But if a psychologist asked a Buddhist to elaborate, and pointed out certain recurring features of that Buddhist's behavior (which anyone can see) and also inquired about their habitual ways of thinking, their habits of hopes and fears, that psychologist might awaken the Buddhist from this dogmatic slumber of thinking that there was no personality. In that case, then, that Buddhist might reply differently. They might say: "Oh, now I see what you pointed out. Well, we Buddhists say with respect to that: 'get over it.'"

This exemplifies the two possible views some students of Buddhism have with respect to the existence or nonexistence of a personality. Either response may, in fact, be regarded as unskillful or unhelpful, depending on the situation. As the Buddha reminds us, we should communicate according to the temperament and openness of those we encounter, and Buddhist teachers do tend to teach according to the circumstance and capacity of those present.[82]

Personality Types, Basic Temperaments

What does Buddhist thought say about personality types or basic temperaments? The Buddhist tradition might have the earliest recorded classification of personality. It's called *A Designation of Human Types* [83] and is one of the Abhidharma texts in the Pali Canon. The term for human types in this text is "personality" (*pudgala*). This term is the name for a kind of fixity, a reference point, or habit that we tend to rely on. As we've already discussed, cutting through this fixity and habit is, in part, the goal of Buddhist study and practice, for as long as we are bound to such reference points of self, me, and mine, we keep the wheel of suffering turning in full swing.

What do Buddhis say about the variety of personality types? The ancient text *A Designation of Human Types* states that there are three basic personality types: you are either (1) a greed type, (2) a hate type, or (3) an ignorance type.[84] These are character or personality types, karmic habits deeply rooted in early development. We can imagine them as orientation and survival strategies, like the Western notions of humors as discussed by Paracelsus (melancholic, choleric, bilic, and sanguine).[85] As such, they are not to be conflated with overt displays of anger, greed, or confusion, expressions of upset which might arise in different circumstances. These three possible temperaments are more deep-seated. They are congenital and constitutive (a materialist, one who only believes in the material reality of things, might say they are genetic).