



SHAMBHALA DRAGON EDITIONS

ZEN *and the* ART OF INSIGHT



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Shambhala Publications, Inc.
Horticultural Hall
300 Massachusetts Avenue
Boston, MA 02115
www.shambhala.com

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Cover art: *Absorption/Insight (Side 2)* by Shakti Maira

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tripitaka. Sūtrapitaka. Prajñāpāramitā. English. Selections.
Zen and the art of insight/selected and translated by Thomas Cleary.
p. cm.

eISBN 978-0-83482-720-2

ISBN 978-1-57062-516-9 (pbk.)

I. Cleary, Thomas F., 1949– . II. Title.

BQ1882.E5C55 1999 99-34711

294.3'85—dc21

CIP

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Introduction



“How do you know?”

What does this mean . . . to you? Does it mean “How do *you* know?” or “How do you *know*?” Or does it mean “*How* do you know?”

Ordinarily this is just a rhetorical question, used as a retort. The implications, however, are deeper than customary cliché. One of the great Taoist Zen masters wrote, “Ordinary expressions and common sayings accord with the path of sages; you should turn to them for careful research.” From this point of view, “How do you know?” opens the door to a world of wonderment. Are there reliable sources of knowledge? Of what can we be sure? How can we know this? Does mentality materially affect matters of knowledge? Is there a way from opinion to knowledge? What kinds of knowledge are available to us? How does what we think we know influence our everyday lives?

If we take the time to ask ourselves “How do you know?”—as a retort, as a question, as a challenge—we may get at the pivot of our relationships with our own thoughts and feelings, with our fellow human beings, and with the world at large. Taken for what it can yield in these roles, the question contains within it a challenge to the root of all ignorance and complacency.

The question of how we know what we know and how we know we know it can be one of the most threatening that can be posed, because it forces us to examine our most basic assumptions about ourselves, our world, and our being in the world. Yet it can also prove one of the most intriguing and

important questions, for it is a first step into the wider reality beyond the pale of hidden bias and unconscious assumption.

How do we know if our perceptions and beliefs are valid? If we use our own knowledge to check our own knowledge, how can we know we are not revolving in circles? If we use others' knowledge to check our knowledge, whose knowledge do we use, how do we know it is knowledge, and how can we know if or how others know when we ourselves do not know if we know what we know?

If we pursue these thoughts too far, we can quickly paralyze ourselves and lose our sense of meaning; yet if we do not ask ourselves these questions, we cannot know what we may be missing, or misconstruing, on account of unconscious assumptions.

One of the difficulties of approaching within our Western context this issue of how we know is that we have learned to disarm the question existentially by giving it terms like *epistemology* and pursuing it intellectually.

That habit is not peculiar to the West, as Eastern writings show, and it is not an insurmountable barrier to experiential insight as long as there lingers no subconscious assumption that the familiar conceptual or intellectual approach is the only way of understanding or knowing things.

When we view religion in terms of belief and worship, the issue of knowledge is not in question. In dogmatic religion, knowledge is identified with the dogma, and the question of its validity cannot arise without creating a sense of violation or threat to the religion.

To avoid the question, the dogma may be called divine revelation or sacred tradition, but it might be that any rationalization for nonexamination of beliefs will tend to satisfy the unconscious desire to remain at the level of belief and worship.

While this may comfort the bewildered within certain limits, the desire for this comfort may also be exploited to manipulate people, even so far as to turn them against one another in the name of their beliefs and actually divert them from their own best interests in the name of salvation.

For us in the West, who have been exposed to some of the worst religious persecutions in the history of the world, and even today hear of violence for and against religion all around the globe, it may be emotionally and intellectually difficult even to conceive of religion that is not based on dogma, belief, or worship. Yet that is precisely what we find within Buddhism, which aims for direct perception of truth and reality, not defense of doctrine or destruction of dissenters.

There is no doubt that Buddhist teachings have, like other religions, employed various edifices of faith and precept from time to time for the protection and maturation of spiritually immature individuals and communities. It is also beyond doubt that such edifices have been diverted, at various stages of their history, to purposes other than those for which they were originally devised. This is historically true of all institutionalized religions, including Buddhism, as is recorded in the writings of their own sages.

The Buddhist teachings on perfection of insight show, to those who have reached a certain level of maturity and for whom the time is right, how to break out of the shell of cultivated belief and spread the wings of independent vision in the sky of freedom. These teachings lead the way from self-projection's bewildering hall of mirrors into the broad daylight of penetrating insight's open, unobstructed space.

When individuals are still at a stage where they need externally imposed structures of belief and practice to modify unruly instincts, habits, and vices, the nondogmatic, nonsectarian gnostic insight of Buddhism is imperceptible and effectively unavailable. This is also true of individuals who are attached to edifices of doctrine and precept at the level of imposing them on others for power or marketing them for profit. According to Buddhist teachings on this subject, in either case it can be harmful for such people even to hear of perfect insight, so their seemingly ungraspable subtlety is actually a form of mercy to the world.

This is one of the apparent paradoxes of the teachings on perfect insight; they are declared to be for the benefit of the whole world, yet at the same time they are not for everyone.

The effect is likened to a powerful medicine that may cure illness but can also damage a weak constitution. Insight can be a shattering experience, beyond the capacity of an immature or unbalanced mind to bear with equanimity.

The Buddhist teachings on insight, furthermore, are of such a nature that certain types of mentality are prone to misconstrue them in harmful ways. Bigots of all kinds, moreover, instinctively fear the insight teachings and deliberately misrepresent them to anyone who will listen. History tells us that the first two grand masters of Zen in China, for example, were actually assassinated by formalists fearing Zen insight teaching would undermine their authority.

Classical Buddhist scripture itself includes the appropriate warnings with its prescriptions, just like modern medicine. Scripture also provides remedial teachings and practices for those as yet unable to benefit from exercises in penetrating insight, as well as advanced material for those who are able to awaken this insight.

There is no one word to fully match the Buddhist term for perfect insight in the English language. In canonical Buddhist Sanskrit the word *prajnaparamita* is used. This term cannot be translated in one or two words, and so it needs expansion on its elements to be understood on the level of ordinary reason and common sense.

The root *jna* stands for knowledge, cognate with the *gno* of the Greek/English word *gnosis* and the *kno* of the English word *knowledge*. This is a very general category of mental function in Sanskrit, however, which is itself subject to further definition by means of prefixes.

The common Sanskrit prefix *pra* is in some senses actually cognate with the still similarly shaped *pre* and *pro* in English (meaning “fore” and “forward”), but its spectrum of meaning in Sanskrit is broader. When used with nouns, the prefix *pra* may convey the senses of “power,” “intensity,” “source,” “completeness,” “perfection,” “separation,” “excellence,” “purity,” and “cessation.”

While the exact meaning of any multimeaning prefix may vary according to the verb to which it is prefixed, when this

multimeaning prefix *pra* is linked to the root verb of knowing, in the Buddhist context of the relativity of knower, knowing, and known, then all of these meanings of the prefix are included in the term *prajna* for perfect insight.

For this reason, the complex picture built up by the root *jna* and prefix *pra* cannot be captured by a simple word or term, be it *insight*, *wisdom*, or *perfect knowledge*. Nevertheless, when actual examples are translated in context, the effect of usage is to enrich the meanings of whatever words or terms of the host language are employed as expedient approximations. Thus words like *insight*, *wisdom*, and *knowledge* come to have special meanings when used in the context of Buddhist relativism and transcendentalism.

Buddhist insight literature in particular warns readers not to take terms too literally according to their conventional concepts. This is one reason that a lot of Buddhist writing is highly metaphorical.

Some of the richness of meaning in *prajna* can be appreciated by considering it in light of those various senses of *pra* as they relate to scriptural descriptions of what perfect insight is and can do:

It is said that perfect insight is *powerful knowledge* in that it can overcome all delusion and all confusion, while nothing can overcome it.

Perfect insight is *intense knowledge* in that it can penetrate external appearances to intuit the inner essence of things.

Perfect insight is the *source knowledge* in that it is the source of enlightenment, and it is the source of enlightenment because it is insight into the source of everything.

Perfect insight is *complete knowledge* in that there is nothing it does not comprehend by intuitive penetration.

Perfect insight is *separate knowledge* in that it is detached from, and other than, thoughts and imaginations, and yet it is able to separate things in the sense of distinguishing them.

Perfect insight is *excellent knowledge* in that it is more objective than conceptualization, more realistic than mentally constructed versions of reality.

Perfect insight is *pure knowledge* because it is unaffected by inner states or external objects.

Perfect insight is *cessation*, or *terminal knowledge*, in that it emerges through cessation of all views and because its awakening terminates compulsive mental habits and false ideas.

The Buddhist scriptures that specialize in the teachings on perfect insight generally follow a pattern of reasoning to show the intrinsic limitations of discursive thought. This is an exercise in attention, not conceptualization, intended to effect a shift of attention from the conceptual to the intuitive mode. Intuitive insight cannot be directly described, so the shift from linear logic to direct perception is approached by deconstruction of conceptualizations. Hence the term *paramita*, or *perfect*, which literally means “gone beyond.”

This method is sometimes misunderstood to rationalize irrationality or dissociation, which are not effective means of awakening insight. Then again, it is sometimes construed in terms of conceptual logic per se and not practiced by those who cannot see its connection to pragmatic penetrating insight.

Irrationalism, dissociation, and nihilism have already been diagnosed in Buddhist scriptures and the commentaries and treatises of the ancient masters, and warnings about them are repeated generation after generation. This is particularly prominent in Zen lore, which is intimately associated with specialization in perfection of insight. Shaku Soen, one of the most distinguished Zen masters of modern Japan, wrote in 1898:

Nowadays it often happens that those who mistake the “silent illumination” of “realization in the dark” for Zen understanding tend to hate writings as if they were poisonous serpents, and fear the scriptures, treatises, and records of sayings as if they were ferocious beasts, saying that the “special transmission outside of doctrine does not insist on writings.” Ah, is that not narrow and low? An ancient illuminate said, “If what is beyond doctrine is clear, then how can what is in the

teachings inhibit that? If what is beyond doctrine does not admit the teachings, then what is beyond doctrine is not true either. Why? If a mirror is perfectly clear, it does not choose among images of things. If the images are not reflected, that means the mirror is not clear yet. You are rejecting the images of things on account of the dust and dirt that covers the mirror. If you are on the Great Way, you do not fabricate such views.” These can be called words of wisdom.¹

The exercises in the scriptural teachings on perfect insight are intended for so-called *bodhisattvas*, meaning people essentially devoted to *bodhi*, or enlightenment; especially the *mahasattvas*, mature people. This does not refer to religious devotion or chronological age per se but to mentality and spirituality. The “silent illumination” of “realization in the dark” mentioned by the Zen master refers to a counterfeit insight that is really a form of self-delusion sought by escapists, nihilists, and others traditionally referred to as immature or weak-minded and unable to profit from teachings on perfection of insight.

These scriptures address their teachings to both men and women in lay life, without any further discrimination in respect to gender or social standing. It is, nevertheless, true that in Zen and Tantric Buddhist traditions insight is personified as a goddess; and in Zen and Zen-Taoist lore on transcendent insight it has been written that it is normally somewhat easier for women to access intuition than it is for men.

Some attribute this to the specific effects of different ways in which men and women have been trained; some attribute it to certain differences in habits of attention and perception resulting from biological differences between men and women. However it may be explained, this is one reason that Tantric Buddhism pictures the model of enlightenment as a man and a woman embracing.

This book contains exercises in perfection of insight from scriptures and treatises specializing in this dimension of Buddhism. These are translated from canonical sources and explained with particular reference to the mystical communion

of Zen and pan-Buddhism, centered on perfection of insight beyond dogma and dependency.

1. From the preface to *Tenkei Zenji Teisho Hekiganroku Kogi*. Tokyo: Koyukan, 1898, 1908, 1910.

Scripture on Perfect Insight Awakening to Essence



1.

If bodhisattvas can realistically comprehend the basis of equality of darkness and light in all matter, when they understand this all things are thus. These bodhisattvas quickly realize supreme perfect enlightenment.

This is also true of sensation, cognition, conditionings, and consciousness. If bodhisattvas can realistically comprehend the basis of equality of darkness and light in all consciousnesses, when they understand this all things are thus. These bodhisattvas quickly realize supreme perfect enlightenment.

The equality of darkness and light
In all things is thus;
Knowing the basis and understanding it,
One attains enlightenment.

COMMENTARY

The equality of darkness and light means the identity of emptiness and existence. In an absolute sense, the essence of things is ungraspable, inaccessible to perception or conception; this is called darkness. In the conventional sense, the characteristics of things can be distinguished, relative to the

mental faculty; this is called light. When the “equality of darkness and light in all things” is realized, that means that the ungraspability of things in their absolute essence does not interfere with the discernment of things in their everyday actuality; and likewise everyday awareness of the characteristics of things does not interfere with intuitive insight into their absolute ungraspability. This is the principle of the center, the mean, or the middle way, the Buddhist path of balance based on transcending the world while in its very midst, neither insisting nor denying, neither grasping nor rejecting, neither obsessing nor ignoring. This balance is sensed, practiced, and realized in the context of the totality of life, so the scripture speaks of realizing the equality of darkness and light in all things.

2.

Matter, sensation, cognition, conditionings, and consciousness occur in three natures—a nonexistent nature, a temporary conditional nature, and a true nature. If wise people realize this as it really is, then they do not create attachments to consciousness and do not manifest arousal; their minds are open and clear. Because they no longer develop grasping attachments to consciousness and their minds are open and clear, they can then attain emancipation through the teachings of the Great Vehicle.

COMMENTARY

Matter (or form), sensation, cognition (including perception and conception), conditionings (patterns of activity), and consciousness are the so-called five clusters, a term for a classical Buddhist method of analyzing a human being to illustrate the fact that what we think of as our self or our person is not the unity we imagine it to be. This formula is used repeatedly in this literature, particularly as a starting point for

enumerating the elements of all experience, both mundane and spiritual.

The three natures in which the five clusters occur—nonexistent, temporary, and true—must be understood to make sense of the teachings on emptiness and perfect insight that say all things are nonexistent or unreal. The nonexistent nature is also called the purely conceptual nature, referring to the contents of our mental descriptions of things. Those mental descriptions are not the things in themselves, not objective realities as such, and so they are referred to as the nonexistent nature of things. Because our confusions and delusions stem from mistaking subjective conceptualizations or imaginations for objective realities, the teaching of perfect insight says that those “things” we imagine are empty; that is, they are empty of absolute reality. In that sense, things as we conceive of them are called unreal or nonexistent.

That does not mean nothing is there, only that it is not as we conceive it; the teaching says there is another nature, a temporary nature, which is the interdependent occurrence of phenomena. We perceive and describe it as thus and so, but that is our interpretation, not the occurrence in itself. The real nature of things is the essence of their dependent nature without the projected overlay of the nonexistent conceptualized nature.

This distinction of three natures helps the mind to sense and maintain balance between “darkness and light,” between detachment and involvement. It is key to understanding, in a practical sense, the seemingly contradictory scriptural statements about things in terms of existence or nonexistence, reality or unreality, purity or impurity, and so on. If this scriptural

practice of pseudoparadox were meant to be an exercise in scholastic philosophy, the level of meaning would invariably be defined. The first step of the exercise is to perceive which of the three natures scripture refers to, and in what sense, when it says, for example, that things are unreal or nonexistent. This elementary exercise in discernment is then developed into the capacity to focus attention deliberately on each nature, first individually and then collectively, in order to acquire the mental capacity to combine buoyant freedom or nonattachment with wakeful, conscious participation in the world.

3.

If bodhisattvas develop attachments to forms as they are described and act on them in practice, practicing in this way is acting on the notion of the existence of a real body and also acting on craving for existence. Then again, if they carry out any quest apart from existence, this means they do not really know form.

The same is true of sensation, cognition, conditionings, and consciousness. If bodhisattvas develop attachments to consciousnesses as they are described and act on them in practice, practicing in this way is acting on the view of the existence of a real body and also practicing craving for existence. If, on the other hand, they carry out any quest divorced from existence, this is not really knowing consciousness.

COMMENTARY

Practice based on sensation, cognition, conditionings, and consciousness as they are described may be interpreted to mean meditation on technical definitions of these factors of being rather than on direct experience of their operation. There are, however, also specific symptoms or manifestations of attempts to cultivate spirituality with underlying attachments or fixations on illusory conceptions of what is being cultivated.

Practicing on the basis of attachment to forms as they are described may be readily observed in cults where there is an obsessive attention placed on ritual paraphernalia, regalia, costumery, and mummary, or where rites and practices are defined and hallowed in terms of formalities of sanctified value in themselves rather than prescribed to particular people for specific purposes.

Practice based on attachment to sensations as described can be observed in cults obsessed with unusual sense experiences, cultivated by meditation, prayer, or other practices, which are identified as holy or spiritual by dint of their unfamiliarity.

Practice based on cognitions as described can be observed in both cultic and academic dogmatics, where temporary provisional verbal and conceptual formulations are rigidified into fixed doctrines and rules.

Practice based on conditionings as described can be observed in attempts to carry out religious practices based on egotistical or selfish motives, trying to reach for spirituality in ways influenced by unconscious or unexamined instinctual and ingrained patterns of habit.

Practice based on consciousness as described can be observed in cults devoted to alteration of consciousness as an end in itself. Their futility is in their obsession with changes whose possible value or detriment is unknown to them because they are fixated on identifying their subjective feelings with

descriptions of changes believed to be significant or spiritual.

A saying from the famous *Pure Name Scripture* helps to keep these principles in mind: “If you practice the teaching through seeing and hearing, sense and recognition, then that is seeing and hearing, sensing and recognizing—it is not practicing the teaching.”

The alternative to this is not a “quest divorced from existence,” which may refer to some form of alienated mysticism, or to nihilism, neither of which solves the fundamental problem of obsessiveness. Alienation and nihilism are also forms of exaggeration.

4.

If bodhisattvas do not develop attachments to forms as they are described and do not apply them in practice, they are not acting on the notion of a real body and not acting on craving for existence; and yet they do not carry out any quest apart from existence. This is really knowing form.

Sensation, cognition, conditionings, and consciousness are also like this. If bodhisattvas do not develop attachments to consciousnesses as they are described and do not apply them in practice, they are not acting on the notion of a real body and not acting on craving for existence either; and yet they do not carry out any quest apart from existence either. This is really knowing consciousness.

COMMENTARY

An essential purpose of perfect insight practice, one classically

emphasized by Zen teachers, is getting over the stage of dogmatic, fixated relationships with the teaching as it is expressed, understood, applied, and realized. This restores the original flexibility of the teaching as it relates to the needs of the individual at each successive stage of spiritual refinement. Without this flexibility, dogmatized and rigidified versions of the teaching become obstacles to progress, even prisons of the spirit.

Zen master Zhenjing said, “Some people do not trust the buddha in themselves and only rely on a little bit of the reflections and echoes of the ancients as imitation wisdom, as objects of knowledge, as fixed doctrines. They tend to turn away from awakening and get mixed up in sense objects; they keep sticking to them and cannot get free.”

Showing the way beyond both spiritual materialism and spiritual alienation or nihilism, Zen master Baizhang said, “Right now, just detach from all things—existence, nonexistence, whatever—and detach even from detachment itself.”

The *Scripture on Unlocking the Mysteries* explains, “The characteristic of conceptual grasping can be known through the association of names and characterizations. The characteristic of dependent origination can be known through the conceptual clinging superimposed on dependent existence. The perfect characteristic of reality can be known by not clinging to the conceptions superimposed on dependent existence.” (*Buddhist Yoga*) This nonclinging is key to perfect insight, as elaborated below.

Bodhisattvas who are mahasattvas should develop three attitudes toward all material forms. First is an attitude of nonattachment. Second is an attitude of noninvolvement. Third is an attitude of purity of heart.

For this reason, whether the minds of bodhisattvas who are mahasattvas are aroused toward those material forms or not aroused, or greatly aroused or impartially aroused, it all should be realistically and impartially examined. Being able to observe impartially in this way, these bodhisattvas quickly realize supreme perfect enlightenment.

This is also true of sensations, cognitions, conditionings, and consciousnesses. Bodhisattvas who are mahasattvas should develop three attitudes toward consciousness. First is an attitude of nonattachment. Second is an attitude of noninvolvement. Third is an attitude of purity of heart.

For this reason, whether the minds of bodhisattvas who are mahasattvas are aroused toward those consciousnesses or not aroused, or greatly aroused or impartially aroused, it all should be realistically and impartially examined. Being able to observe impartially in this way, these bodhisattvas quickly realize supreme perfect enlightenment.

COMMENTARY

Nonattachment, noninvolvement, and purity of heart are attitudes that open the way to objectivity. Here objectivity is applied to the “realistic and impartial examination” of arousal of mind. Realistic and impartial examination of the arousal of mind helps one to sense tendencies toward subjective distortions in one’s relationship with the world.

Zen master Huanglong wrote, “When you do not bring up

anything at all, you cannot bear the burden; suddenly realizing you're wrong, your heart is filled with infinite joy. Once poison is gone from your heart, even serpents and tigers are your friends." Not bringing up anything at all means not clinging to things; not bearing the burden of nothing at all means not clinging to nothingness. Infinite joy in the heart is the clarity and buoyancy of the mind unencumbered by obsessions. The friendship of serpents and tigers means the ability to remain unattached, uninvolved, and pure of heart in the midst of all mental activity, even negative thoughts and emotions. This is like the ability of the bodhisattvas to examine realistically and impartially the arousal of their minds even though they are detached.

6.

If bodhisattvas who are mahasattvas see existence or nonexistence in material forms, they do not really know or understand. The same is true of sensations, cognitions, conditionings, and consciousnesses. If bodhisattvas who are mahasattvas see existence or nonexistence in consciousnesses, they do not really know or understand.

COMMENTARY

To see existence means to be fixated on affirmation; to see nonexistence means to be fixated on denial. To avoid these extremes and maintain central balance, one sees things as neither absolutely existent nor absolutely nonexistent. In a sense, the critical issue is not to see *that* things exist or do not but rather *how* things exist or do not.

Zen master Longji said, "If you affirm the pillar, you do not see the pillar. If you deny the pillar, you do not see the pillar. When affirmation and denial are completely gone, then you gain

understanding within affirmation and denial.”

Zen master Shoushan used to hold up a stick and say, “If you call it a stick, you are clinging. If you do not call it a stick, you are ignoring. So what do you call it?”

7.

If bodhisattvas who are mahasattvas arouse the intention to dwell in the realm of equanimity, then when their minds seek liberation from material form their minds are moved by form, shook-up and totally agitated. Because of this, these bodhisattvas find it hard to attain liberation.

The same is true of sensation, cognition, conditioning, and consciousness. If bodhisattvas who are mahasattvas arouse the intention to dwell in the realm of equanimity, when their minds seek liberation from consciousness their minds are moved by consciousness; they are shook-up and become totally agitated. Because of this, these bodhisattvas find it hard to attain liberation.

If bodhisattvas who are mahasattvas intend to dwell in equanimity, when they seek liberation from material form, if their minds are neither attached to form nor disconnected, because of this these bodhisattva-mahasattvas skillfully attain liberation.

The same is true of sensation, cognition, conditioning, and consciousness. If bodhisattva-mahasattvas intend to dwell in equanimity, when they seek liberation from consciousness, if their minds are neither attached to consciousness nor dissociated, because of this these bodhisattvas skillfully attain liberation.

COMMENTARY

When the intention to attain liberation and dwell in equanimity is a reaction to disturbance by instability and change, insofar as reactivity is the basis of the intention, that very reactivity accompanies the pursuit of the intention through any subsequent course of action. The Third Grand Master of Zen said, "If you try to stop movement to return to stillness, stopping makes even more agitation." Thus the fixation of the intent renders the enterprise futile. That is why meditation can produce agitation and even derangement in some people. The remedy is the balance described in the scripture here, being "neither attached nor dissociated." The Third Grand Master of Zen said, "Trying to get rid of existence is obscuring being; trying to follow emptiness is turning away from emptiness."

Essentials of the Great Scripture on Perfect Insight



1.

Insight is provisionally said to be of two kinds; yet being beyond subject and object, they are ultimately no different. Why? When bodhisattvas cultivate insight, they mentally seek the nature and characteristics of things; be it selfhood or selflessness, permanence or impermanence, origination or destruction, existence or emptiness, nothing like this can be found. They do not find any characteristics to grasp and do not conceive any grasping views.

At this time they detach from all views of characteristics and impartially realize the true aspect of all things, which has no duality, no difference, no beginning, no ending, no origination, and no destruction. It is not existent and not void; it transcends all manner of verbal expression and is forever beyond the realm of all mental constructs.

COMMENTARY

When insight is said to be of two kinds, this refers to insightful observation of the characteristics of things and intuitive insight into the nature or essence of things. This passage illustrates the practical combination of these two modes of insight, how one leads to the other. Thorough examination of characteristics

leads to realization of their ultimate ungraspability, thus opening up intuitive insight into essence. By virtue of intuitive insight into essence the mind is liberated from fixation on the characteristics of things as conventionally defined, thus enabling observational insight to see ordinarily unperceived aspects of things. This is how the cooperation of these two modes of insight can awaken faculties of creativity and artistry in seemingly mysterious ways. The apparent negativity of the insight formulations—“not this, not that, not the other”—represents the process of clearing the mind of preoccupation with limited views of reality.

2.

Insight is of five kinds: insight into the true aspect of things; observing insight; literary insight; insight into objects, referring to the two truths, absolute and conventional; and auxiliary insight, referring to all beneficial knowledge.

The true aspect of things is the essence of insight. Observing is the characteristic of insight. Literature is the cause of insight. Objects are the sphere of insight. Auxiliaries are accompaniments of insight.

COMMENTARY

It is normal for Buddhist texts to define technical terms differently. In the perspective of Buddhist insight, there is no fixed definition of anything at all and cannot be, because definition is constructed relative to perception. Different definitions have therefore been provided for different individuals and communities at different times, according to their particular stages of development and what they then need to make further progress. Thus the definition of a term, or the meaning of a principle, may in effect change for an individual or a group in the course of progress. Buddhist literature contains many examples of this, including illustrations of what happens when the process either is halted or gets out of hand and produces intellectual

dissociation.

In some cases, relatively simple and relatively complex definitions of technical terms may appear in the very same text, as here in this work on perfect insight. A relatively simple definition may be utilized as a way of focusing on basics or essentials, while a relatively complex definition may follow up as a means of outmaneuvering tendencies to oversimplify and dogmatize working formulas. Those who become fixated on any one of the five kinds of insight, for example, will develop corresponding warps and defects of mind.

Fixation on insight into the true nature of things alone destroys the intellect, undermines the will, and fosters nihilism; fixation on observing insight alone results in paralysis through flooding, bias through arbitrary selection, or aimless meandering of mind; fixation on literary insight alone produces sterile intellectualism and imitative poetics; fixation on insight into objects alone splits the mind and divides the attention; fixation on auxiliary insight alone makes one the captive of mundane causes and aims. Zen master Baizhang said that if you seek knowledge and blessings before having realized the absolute truth, you will be ridden by knowledge and blessings and cannot be free to use them freely; if you gain knowledge and blessings after having realized the absolute truth, on the other hand, then it will be possible not only to be free yourself but also to employ knowledge and blessings freely. The important point is that these various aspects or modes of insight must work together in their proper relationships in order to effect the balance and wholeness of enlightenment.

3.

Insight means comprehension because it can

comprehend all objects of knowledge.

Insight means no knowledge because if there is anything known you do not know the true aspect.

Insight means destruction in that it destroys the verbal expressibility of all things, whether in terms of nature or of characteristics.

Insight means nondestruction because it witnesses the true aspect without destroying temporal definitions.

Insight means detachment because it is forever detached from all clinging obsession.

Insight means nondissociation because it witnesses the characteristics of all things.

Insight means no detachment or nondetachment because it is not dissociated from anything at all, yet it is detached from everything.

Insight means neither destruction nor nondestruction because it never destroys nor fails to destroy anything.

COMMENTARY

Insight means comprehension first of all because in the absence of comprehension there would be no notion or mention of insight to begin with. The various modes of insight mentioned comprehend the several natures in which phenomena occur—the nonexistent (conceptualized or imagined) nature, the temporary conditional (relative or dependent) nature, and the true (real or perfect) nature.

Insight means no knowledge in respect to the true or real nature of things, defining *knowledge* here as recognition of external appearances. When the mind is focused on recognition of gross external appearances, then insight into the subtlest essence is obscured by preoccupation with the cruder function of ordinary “knowledge.” That does not mean, naturally, that ignorance of the evident is itself the way to the ineffable.

Insight is destruction in the sense that it destroys the notion that the essence of things can be captured in words, and it destroys the notion that verbal definitions of the characteristics of things have an exclusive, necessary, and accurate correspondence to the things in themselves. Zen literature abounds in images of smashing, destroying, killing, and so on, all representing the dissolution of rigid habits of thought, including the unconscious habit of confusing descriptions with actualities.

Resolving the problem of confusing descriptions with actualities does not demolish either the descriptions or the actualities. What it does is to place them into relative perspective, so that the mind can operate on the ordinary level without that becoming a form of bondage or a limit to perspective. Description of things, both mentally and verbally, is often useful and necessary to everyday life, but it can become a prison when we forget its origins and its original purposes. When we think what we think is what is, then if problems arise, as they inevitably do in the course of evolution, we tend to try to change things without realizing we need to change our ideas of things. This can result in a sort of involution, which in extreme forms can cause an individual personality, a family, or a social group to collapse inwardly around itself. In the meantime, it creates invisible and unsurmountable barriers to growth and progress. The function of perfect insight is to penetrate this vicious circle and liberate the mind from its closed pattern of disguised self-involvement.

Insight means both detachment and nondissociation because both of these factors are necessary to achieve mental balance. Detachment alone leads to dissociation, whereas immersion alone leads to encapsulation of consciousness. Detachment without dissociation, the middle path of centered balance, is a

formula for the coevolution of wisdom and compassion.

Insight goes beyond polarities of detachment and immersion, or destruction and conservation, in that it embodies each and every one of these factors in proper balance, neither too detached nor too immersed, not destroying what is not to be destroyed and not maintaining what is not to be maintained. At first there is pseudopolarity in the process of meditation, concentration, and contemplation; but in the final integration of mental capacities, this provisional polarity is transcended and both the ordinary and the ineffable can be perceived at the same time. This is harmonious integration of the several modes of perfect insight.

Treatise on the Great Scripture on Perfect Insight



1.

Scripture: By virtue of nonattachment to everything, you should have perfect insight.

COMMENTARY

Again the theme of nonattachment as a quintessential prerequisite to perfect insight is emphasized in scripture. Of course, nonattachment to things does not mean denying or ignoring things. Somewhat more precisely, in the more discriminating language used in the scripture quoted above, this means nonattachment to the nonexistent nature of everything. The nonexistent nature of everything means the way we conceive or imagine things to be, not the way they really are. By nonattachment to conceptualizations or imaginations of the way things are, we can gain access to insight into the way things really are.

TREATISE

QUESTION: What is perfect insight?

ANSWER: Bodhisattvas seek knowledge of all types from their first inspiration; the insight therein recognizing the true aspect of all things is perfect insight.

COMMENTARY

Here it is worth noting the fact that the treatise explicitly says that bodhisattvas, or enlightening beings, seek knowledge of all types from their first inspiration. Knowledge of all types is the omniscience of buddhas, often outlined in terms of ten powers of knowledge: knowledge of what is so and what is not; knowledge of results of actions; knowledge of all sorts of interests of all kinds of people; knowledge of all sorts of realms; knowledge of different faculties, higher and lower; knowledge of all destinations; knowledge of all states of meditation and concentration, including how they are defiled, how they are purified, and how to enter and emerge from them; knowledge of past states of being; knowledge of the conditions in which other beings are to be reconstituted when their present conditions change; knowledge of the end of contamination of mind by anything. These powers of knowledge embrace the five types of insight defined in the treatise excerpted before this one, *Essentials of the Scripture on Perfect Insight*—absolute insight, or insight into the true inner nature of things; observing insight, or direct witness of the characteristics of things; literary insight, or understanding of meanings and expressions; objective insight, or understanding of the absolute and relative realities of things; and auxiliary insight, consisting of “all beneficial knowledge” of whatever kind.

Some of these forms of knowing are part of our everyday experience, based on ordinary necessities. Buddhism teaches that we can enhance these familiar modes of knowledge and also activate others that are not generally familiar but nevertheless are possible, accessible, and of potential benefit to humankind.

For the time being, what is perhaps most essential to keep in mind, based on this teaching, is that the bodhisattva or Buddhist

practitioner does not become a devotee of just one form of knowledge, even perfect insight. In the course of time it may be necessary to concentrate on one or another mode of knowing in order to round out the mind of the individual or community, but on the whole it is not enlightening to focus exclusively on a partial capacity. Obsession with the transcendental mode of perfect insight is particularly mentioned in Zen lore, no doubt as a balance to Zen's own intensity in this domain, as a dangerous form of intoxication that can deprive the obsessive individual of common sense. For pragmatic purposes, this important caveat can be brought to mind with relative ease by means of the Zen proverb "If you stare at it, you'll go blind."

QUESTION: If that is so, it should not be called perfect, because it has not reached the limit of knowledge.

ANSWER: The knowledge a buddha realizes is really perfect; the practice of bodhisattvas is also called perfect because it is based on this perfection, referring to the result in the context of cause. In the mind of a buddha, this perfect insight turns into knowledge of all types.

Bodhisattvas cultivating knowledge seek to cross over to the other shore, so it is called perfection. Buddhas have already crossed over to the other shore, so then it is called knowledge of all types.

COMMENTARY

This question addresses the issue of order. As mentioned earlier, too much concern with formal knowledge in the beginning of spiritual studies, beyond what is necessary for ordinary life and for higher orientation, tends to constitute an obstacle or interference. This is one of the meanings of the Buddhist term *barrier of knowledge*, in which consciousness of one mode or level of knowledge itself becomes a barrier to more subtle awareness. Therefore the bodhisattva who is in the process of "crossing over" to the "other shore"—transcending

fixation of attention to reach liberation and freedom—needs perfection of insight in order to accomplish this mental transformation. The other forms of knowledge and practice cultivated during this process are employed for the purposes of awakening insight, first by creating a balanced personality and a healthy relationship with the world, then by unraveling the inner knots of thought. Once transcendence has been realized and buddhahood attained, the buddha then “comes back” to the world, equipped with all sorts of knowledge gained in the process, which now can be used for the sake of others.

QUESTION: In buddhas all afflictions and habits have already ended, and their eye of wisdom is pure; they should realistically apprehend the true aspect of all things. The true aspect of all things is perfect insight. Bodhisattvas have not yet ended all contamination, and their eye of wisdom is not yet pure—how can they apprehend the true aspect of all things?

ANSWER: To give a brief explanation, it is like people going into the ocean. Some have just gone in, some have gone all the way to the depths. Although there is a difference between the shallow and the deep, they are both said to have entered. So it is with buddhas and bodhisattvas. Buddhas have thoroughly plumbed the depths, but bodhisattvas have not yet cut off all afflictions and habits, so they have little power and cannot enter deeply.

Suppose someone lit a lamp in a dark room, lighting up the things in the room so that they could all be clearly distinguished. If a bigger and brighter lamp is brought in, making everything even clearer, then you realize that the darkness dispelled by this second lamp was still there with the first lamp. Yet even though there was still darkness with the first lamp, it could nevertheless illuminate things. If there were no darkness left by the first lamp, there would be no light added by the second lamp.

So it is with the knowledge of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Although the knowledge of bodhisattvas is combined with afflictions and habits, it can still apprehend the real aspect of things, just as the first lamp can still illuminate things. The knowledge of buddhas also apprehends the real aspect of things, but without any more affliction or habit, just as the second lamp is brighter and clearer.

COMMENTARY

The *Flower Ornament Scripture* says, “The mind, intellect, and consciousness of Buddha are ungraspable. One can know the mind of Buddha only in terms of the infinity of knowledge. Just as space is the resting place of all things, while space itself has no resting place, so also is the knowledge of Buddha the resting place of all mundane and transcendental knowledge, while the knowledge of Buddha has no resting place.” (“Manifestation of Buddha”)

QUESTION: What is the real aspect of things?

ANSWER: Everyone talks about the real aspect of things as if his opinion were fact. The real aspect of all this is indestructible, permanent, changeless, and has no creator. As Buddha says to Subhuti in the scripture, “If bodhisattvas view everything as neither permanent nor impermanent, neither painful nor pleasurable, neither itself nor not itself, neither existent nor nonexistent, and yet do not entertain these as views, they are called bodhisattvas’ practice of perfect insight.” This means relinquishing all views, stopping all talk, detaching from all mental patterns; it is originally unproduced and imperishable, like nirvana. Such is the character of all things. This is called the real aspect of all things.

COMMENTARY

The key phrase or “eye” of this passage is the first: “Everyone talks about the real aspect of things as if his opinion were fact.” The practice of relinquishing views, stopping mental talk, and detaching from mental patterns is an exercise employed to gain the objectivity whereby opinion is distinguished from fact. Zen master Foyan said, “If you would like to be free from subjective seeking, just do not conceive opinions and views.” As in the writings on perfect insight, the Zen master goes on to make it clear that this practice of detachment does not mean dissociation: “This nonseeking does not mean blanking out and ignoring everything. In everyday life, twenty-four hours a day, when there is unclarity in the immediate situation, it is generally because the opinionated mind is grasping and rejecting.”
(Instant Zen)

TREATISE

As it says in the verses praising perfect insight,
Perfect insight is truly objective, not distorted:
Thought, imagination, and envisioning gone,
Manners of verbal expression also vanish.

COMMENTARY

The ordinary perceptions and notions of things on which we act are conditioned by thought, imagination, mental pictures, and mental talk. All of these inner activities that influence our perception and behavior are also conditioned by other factors, both inherited and acquired. Therefore a temporary cessation of the stream of conditioned thought, imagination, envisioning, and description is employed to give the mind room to perceive things more directly. Terms such as *gone* and *vanished* refer to this practice of halting or stopping the flow of habit; they do not mean to suggest that insightful people can no longer think, imagine, envision, or speak. What cessation means is that the mind is not imprisoned by manners of thought, imagination, envisioning, or speech.

Infinite sins removed,
Pure clean mind always unified—
Such a fine respectable person
Is able to see insight.

COMMENTARY

Buddhist teaching generally views sin as a result of ignorance, in that harmful and evil actions result from misperceptions of realities. These misperceptions may include all sorts of interpersonal misunderstandings, paranoid elaboration of negative emotions, miscalculation of effects of actions, and misunderstanding of self-interest. Cultivation of the ability to stop the automatic flow of compulsive habit energies is proposed to enable the individual to overcome wayward tendencies at the unconscious level. In this way “infinite sins” are “removed.”

The “pure clean mind” in Buddhist terms does not mean thinking pure clean thoughts or thinking of good things; it means the mind in its pristine clarity and fluidity, not imprisoned by automatic habits of thought and emotion, aware of everything without being fixated on anything.

Like space, without defilement,
Not a fantastic theory, not literal—
If you can see this way,
This is seeing Buddha.

COMMENTARY

The *Flower Ornament Scripture* says, “If you want to know the realm of buddhahood, make your mind clear as space.” This formula is used in classical Zen to represent the path of central balance in which there is neither attachment nor dissociation. Space contains everything, yet nothing adheres to it; similarly,

the mirrorlike mind sees everything without fixation on anything. This is not a fantastic theory, nor is it meant literally, in the sense that it does not propose that the mind be literally empty or blank. It is likened to the clarity of a mirror, in which everything is then reflected impartially.

If you truly see Buddha, insight, and nirvana,
These three are one—really they have no difference.
The buddhas and bodhisattvas can benefit everyone:
Insight is their mother, giving birth and nursing them.
Since Buddha is a father to all beings,
And insight gives birth to buddhas,
It is therefore the grandmother of all living beings.
Insight is one reality, But Buddha speaks of it in various
terms,
Using different words according to people's capacities.
If people see insight, they no longer want to dispute;
It is like the dew drying up all at once when the sun comes
out.

COMMENTARY

Many different terms are used for insight, as well as for other elements of Buddhism, in order to communicate with people of different cultures, mentalities, and capacities. Superficial followers may dispute with each other about the terms they like, or split hairs about subjective senses of nuance, but those who actually awaken insight have no such inclination any longer. For the insightful, the words and teachings were means of “crossing over” the mire of imprisoned thought; once they have been put into effect and insight comes alive, the words themselves are not the point. There is nothing more to argue about in the light of insight, because no subjective projection is imposed on reality, so truth is self-evident.

The power of insight can move two kinds of people;
The ignorant are afraid, the knowing rejoice.

COMMENTARY

The ignorant are afraid of insight because they fear that their cherished opinions and beliefs will be threatened, thereby threatening the stability of their worldview and sense of self. The knowing rejoice because they realize that the dismantling or melting of rigid fixations does not destroy the integrity of the self or the world but introduces a realm of constructive freedom of choice. It may also be said that the “ignorant,” or “foolish,” who are afraid of insight includes those who are weak-willed and shrink from the responsibilities inherent in freedom of any kind.

If people attain insight, they become insightful;
They are not obsessed even with insight,
Let alone other things!

COMMENTARY

Obsession with insight before it is realized interferes with realization of insight. Obsession with insight on its realization interferes with complete integration of the mind. In Zen poetry, obsession with insight is pictured as being dazzled by a light shining right in your eyes, making you lose your way home.

Insight comes from nowhere, and also goes nowhere;
The intelligent may search everywhere
But cannot find it anywhere.

COMMENTARY

Perfect insight is not a concept, notion, idea, or mental construction; therefore the intellect cannot apprehend it; direct insight and discursive intellect are different modalities of consciousness.

If they don't see insight, this is called being bound;
If people see insight, this too is called being bound.