

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Year Three – Teachers’ Notes by Vadanya

Module 2: The Nature of Existence 2 – In Search of the Middle Way

Introduction to the module

Welcome to this rather grandly named module. This sounds as though it is the sequel to The Nature of Existence 1, but actually it has a very different feel and content, and people do not need to have studied Nature of Existence 1 to study this. The wisdom material in Part 4 of the Foundation Year is sufficient background.

The module is subtitled ‘In Search of the Middle Way’ – as you will see, finding a middle way between nihilism and eternalism in our approach to the Dharma is a recurring theme.

Structure and content

The module nominally covers 6 weeks (although I recommend taking at least 8 – see later) structured as follows:

Week 1: ‘The original roots’ – The roots of the Mahayana teachings in basic Buddhism, as seen in the Pāli Canon.

Week 2: The Madhyamaka and the Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras – Mainly about Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka, giving a framework for understanding the Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras.

Week 3: The Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras, part 1 – Extracts from various sutras on two topics, ‘*sūnyatā*’ and ‘similes and analogies’.

Week 4: The Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras, part 2 – More extracts on ‘relative and absolute truth’, ‘spiritual attainments’, ‘Suchness’ and the nature of the Buddha’, and ‘The place of faith and devotion’.

Week 5: The Yogācāra – Focusing on the ‘mind-only’ philosophy, the doctrine of the *alaya vijñāna*, and the concept of the three levels of truth, with an emphasis on how these ideas could feed into our practice.

Week 6: The Tathāgatagarbha doctrine, and the role of mythic truth – What does the doctrine say, can it be traced back to ‘basic’ Buddhism, what are the different interpretations, what are the dangers, and can we benefit from some aspects of it while avoiding the potential dangers? Plus a final brief excursion into poetry and myth with the *Avatamsaka Sutra* vision of mutual interpenetration.

As you can see this is a meaty module. I have aimed for an approach that is neither scholarly on the one hand, nor dumbed-down on the other; after all this is the third year of the course, and folks should not be surprised if a module with a title like this one asks them to think.

More than most course modules, this one is progressive, in the sense that each week builds on the ones before, *and if someone misses a week and does not go through the material thoroughly, they may feel lost later*. It is particularly important that everyone comes to the first three sessions, at least. You need to stress this to the mitras, and find out when folk will be unavoidably away.

I would suggest trying to arrange it so that everyone can come to all of the sessions, or at least the first three, and inserting two extra weeks that can be slotted in when someone is away, making an 8-week course overall. This would also have the advantage of giving folk more time to go through the material, which some people may find challenging. The extra two weeks I would suggest could be:

1. A week of more general, open discussion about any issues raised or points that people find interesting, not specifically linked to the questions. You could also use this session to catch up on any questions that you have been able to do justice to.
2. A week combining meditative reflection on the Five Skandhas with a pūjā to Mañjuḥoṣa or Prajñā-Pāramitā. Some suggestions about the meditation on the skandhas are made in the comments on question 3 of Week 1. If appropriate you could also ask people to select some short phrases from the extracts from the Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras discussed in Weeks 3 and 4 that have a particular resonance for them. You could then either drop these into a meditation by repeating them slowly and allowing people to dwell on them, or you could suggest people write down their selection and imagine themselves ‘holding it to their heart’, as Mañjuśrī holds a Prajñā-Pāramitā text to his heart.

One reviewer also suggested that it might be a good idea to spend two weeks on Week 2, which they thought was particularly substantial, and another said much the same about Week 5. Personally I think that the sutra extracts in Weeks 3 and 4 are most deserving of an extra week. So opinions vary, but the overall message would seem to be: allow plenty of time for this module, and take the official six-week timescale with a pinch of salt.

Possible problems

In my experience of studying this material with mitras, people’s responses fall somewhere between two extremes. Some people absolutely love it, their eyes light up and they find it a relief to delve into some of the big ideas that prevent our practice becoming mere routine. At the opposite extreme, some people complain that this stuff seems not to have much relevance to their everyday experience. To the latter group I am tempted to say that if our everyday experience is completely mundane this material will not be relevant to it, but that the real question then is

how we can make our everyday experience more relevant to this material. However this may be the ghost of Edward Conze speaking!

But in the end our practice does need to be coloured or flavoured by at least a hint of the wisdom perspective, or it will become mere toilsome do-goodery. The third year of the mitra course does not seem too early to start tingeing our awareness with some of these ideas. There is also the fact – mentioned in the notes for mitras – that people will almost certainly come across these ideas anyway in their reading, probably in a hidden and possibly in a distorted form, and a thoughtful appreciation of them will help them to avoid either intoxication or confusion.

Week 1: The Original Roots

Questions for reflection and discussion

Here are some ideas on some of the questions you could use to supplement the mitras own answers, if you find them helpful.

Q1: *Do you tend to think that physical matter (in the form of the brain and nervous system) gives rise to consciousness? Do you find it difficult to think in any other way? (Most of us do.) In what ways do the Twelve Nidānas explored in The Nature of Existence I not fit in with this idea? Find any links in the chain that seem to go the other way – i.e. where consciousness seems to condition the outer world of our experience – and discuss these with the group.*

One example was mentioned in the text: in dependence on consciousness (*viññāna*) arises name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*).

Q2: *The Three Lakṣaṇas are usually seen as negative aspects of conditioned existence. Can you see any positive sides to impermanence and lack of self-nature?*

Impermanence is what allows transformation, growth and evolution. We tend to focus on the aspect of it that we don't like – that the things we are attached to (and especially our own dear selves!) go out of existence. However impermanence also means that new things are always coming into existence. Applied to ourselves, impermanence means that we can change – indeed we have no choice but to change. *Anātman* implies the idea of interconnectedness. Things do not have self nature because they do not exist in a way that is really separate from the world around them. So everything is intimately linked to everything else. In later Buddhism this is expressed in a positive way as interconnectedness, and even as the interpenetration of all things, as described in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and symbolised by Indra's Net. Clearly this could be a highly positive vision, which would give rise to a sense of solidarity and *mettā* with the world and all beings.

Q3: *Have you made the teaching of the skandhas your own? The Five Skandhas are a list that will crop up over and over again during this module, and you need to be thoroughly familiar with it. Be prepared to give a short presentation on the skandhas to the rest of the group if asked.*

This is an opportunity to check that folk understand the skandhas. If you want it, a handout on the skandhas is included at the end of the notes for this session. It is suggested that you should at some point lead a meditative reflection on the skandhas during this module, inviting the mitras to identify each of the Five Skandhas in their own experience. One suggestion is that you do this during an extra evening of meditation and *pūjā*, as suggested earlier.

Q4: *Do you think the skandhas completely cover the whole range of our experience? Try to think of some other ways of dividing up and analysing ourselves and our world, and share these with the group.*

To make the skandhas cover everything the word *samskāras* – which usually means volitions, is sometimes redefined as a catch-all, which includes everything that is left out – not fair play really! Otherwise there seems no place for emotions, for example, and perhaps you can think of other omissions. But does this really matter? The skandhas are a tool to help us see the truth of *anātman*, not an attempt at a scientific description of the world. Perhaps other classifications would work just as well, and indeed the Buddha uses other analyses, such as the senses, and later Buddhists came up with a much more elaborate one in the way they classified existence into ‘dharma’s’?

As an alternative to the skandhas we could divide ourselves into body, intellect, emotions, and will – similar to the skandhas, but not quite the same.

Q5: Try reflecting on the skandhas this week as part of your meditation practice, in the way that the Buddha recommends. Reflect on each skandha in turn, seeing its changeable nature, the way it is beyond your control, and the way it causes you suffering. Tell the group about any effects this has.

This is an attempt to get people moving from the level of hearing to that of reflecting or perhaps even meditating on the topic under discussion. Strictly and theoretically this exercise is not in accord with the path of regular steps as far as mitras are concerned, but I’m assuming that anybody doing this module will have been practicing for some time. If you have any doubts – especially about whether any of the people in your group have enough integration and positive emotion for this, then tell them not to do it.

Q6: Do you understand the idea of anātman at the intellectual level? Does it seem convincing to you?

Clearly this is an opportunity to check that people have at least a basic understanding of what we are talking about here, before we plunge into the Madhyamaka and Prajñā-Pāramitā.

Q7: Do you like or loathe the idea that you do not have a real self – or something in between? Why?

Probably the most healthy response is to loathe the idea! After all, if we are honest we are likely to be still pretty firmly trapped in our ego, and our death – physical or spiritual – is not likely to be really welcome to us. Some people like the idea of anātman for all the wrong reasons, such as because:

- They basically dislike themselves.
- It seems to absolve them of the responsibility of acting ethically.
- It seems to excuse all their flaws.

But we should not assume that everyone who responds positively to the idea is like that – some people may have at least a glimpse of the liberating, expansive potential it could open up.

Q8: *In what ways could the idea of anātman be liberating? In what ways could it be dangerous? Do you think it would be a spiritually useful idea for you at the moment, at your present stage on the spiritual path?*

Seeing that we do not have a self is the way to go beyond suffering, and to experience a sense of solidarity with all other beings – among other minor benefits! On the other hand if we prematurely abandon our sense of self we may also abandon our sense of free choice and personal responsibility for our actions. Sangharakshita has stressed that before we go beyond the self, we need to build a strong, positive, integrated, ethical self. If we shirk this task by rationalising that we don't have a self anyway, this will be very unhelpful. The Buddha himself did not always think that it was helpful to people to teach them non-self. For example in the *Ananda Sutta* (SN 44:10), Vacchagotta asks the Buddha whether there is such a thing as the self or not. The Buddha refuses to answer either way. Then when Vacchagotta has gone, the Buddha explains to Ananda that if he had told Vacchagotta there was no such thing as the self he would have taken this as confirming the nihilistic viewpoint that the consciousness ceases to exist after death.

Strictly speaking maybe we should follow the Buddha's example, and not talk about anātman with mitras. But in the modern world, where people have easy access to books about the Dharma aimed at highly advanced practitioners, folk will come across these ideas anyway, and we need to make sure that they understand them.

Q9: *Can you think of ways in which the ideas or 'views' of Buddhism affected the way you live since you started practicing? Have they had a positive or negative effect? Do you think you would benefit by abandoning such views as fetters?*

Hopefully Buddhist ideas have had some positive effects on people, so this discussion should give a practical demonstration of the fact that, while views might ultimately obscure reality, until we are quite far advanced on the path we need Dharmic ideas as a framework for our practice, and to counteract all the other stuff we have been conditioned to believe.

Handout on the skandhas (**Q3**) follows:

The Five Skandhas

The five elements of the conditioned human experience

1. **Rūpa (form).** The apparently solid external forms that appear to us in our experience of our bodies and the world around us. Form is not the same as the Western concept of ‘matter’, which is an abstract concept about the nature of form; for example form might also be experienced in a dream.
2. **Vedanā (feeling, or hedonic tone).** The pleasurable or unpleasant feelings we get from our sense experience.
3. **Samjñā (perception, recognition, and labelling).** The perception and recognition of parts of our experience as ‘things’ and so on; when we pick one pattern out of our experience and think, ‘apple’, or ‘chair’, we are samjñā-ing.
4. **Samskāras (volitions).** Samskāras are habitual patterns of volition formed over time by our circumstances and the choices we make.
5. **Vijñāna (dualistic or divided consciousness).** The consciousness which sees everything in terms of self and other, desirable and undesirable, and so on; distinguished from non-dual wisdom, *jñāna*, by the prefix *vi*, as in our word divide; often translated just as ‘consciousness’ which causes endless confusion, often giving the impression that Buddhism thinks consciousness is a bad thing!

Week 2: The Madhyamaka and the Prajñā-Pāramitā Sutras

Questions for reflection and discussion

Q1: What do you experience when you chant the Heart Sutra in a pūjā? Do you think you understand what it is saying? If not, do you think it can still communicate something worthwhile to you?

Q2: What, in your own words, is the connection between pratītya samutpāda and śūnyatā?

Obviously the connection is explained in the texts for this week and last. The idea here is to get people to re-express this in their own words, as a way of helping them to see the connection for themselves.

Q3: Do you think you have a self? What sort of a self might you have, and what sort don't you have?

As explained in the text, we clearly don't have an independent unchanging self. However we might still see ourselves as having a self that is influenced by conditions and changes over time. As Sangharakshita has pointed out, for various reasons we need to retain some idea of a self until the very latest stages of the path.

Q4: Which of the following do you think has the greatest claim to being a 'thing-in-itself':

- *A cell in your body.*
- *The organ that the cell is part of and depends on – say your liver.*
- *Your whole body which your liver is part of and depends on.*
- *The mind-body complex that your body is part of and depends on.*
- *The society and ecosystem that your mind-body is part of and depends on.*

Logically, none of the above. This is a slightly different argument from the standard Madhyamaka one, but it might be useful for some people – everything is both composed of smaller systems and part of larger systems, so where we draw the boundaries between different 'things' is arbitrary at best.

Q5: Why, in your own words, do the skandhas belong to the realm of relative, and not absolute truth? Can you explain why some other Buddhist teaching of your own choice is also relative truth?

One line of reasoning is described in the text. You may be able to think of others.

Q6: Do you think you are more in danger of taking the teachings of Buddhism too literally, or of practicing them too half-heartedly?

Q7: Do you tend more towards nihilism or eternalism? What could you do to counteract this, to regain the middle way?

If folk tend towards nihilism, they could focus more on the apparently ‘religious’, devotional, or ‘mystical’ aspects of Buddhism, and not worry about the danger of eternalism, which for them does not exist. (This has been called ‘bending the straw the other way’ – to make the straw straight we need to overcompensate for the bend it has at the moment.) They could also experiment with looking at the world through the lenses of the Yogācāra and Tathāgatagarbha ideas we will be introducing in the last two weeks of this module. If folk tend towards eternalism, then reading and reflecting on the Madhyamaka ideas in more depth will tend to undermine this, as might immersing oneself in the very un-metaphysical world of the Pāli Canon.

Weeks 3 and 4: The Prajñā-Pāramitā Sūtras

Introduction

In weeks 3 and 4 we will look at some extracts from the Prajñā-Pāramitā sūtras. The study material consists mainly of a selection of excerpts grouped under the following headings:

- The place of faith and devotion.
- *Śūnyatā*.
- Similes and analogies.
- Absolute and relative truth.
- Spiritual attainments.
- ‘Suchness’ and the nature of the Buddha.

We will explore the first two of these topics this week, and the remaining four next week.

After each extract there is usually a brief explanatory comment, and one or more questions for reflection and discussion. In these notes for the study leader I have included everything that the mitras are given, and added some suggested answers after the questions for discussion, where this seems appropriate. The idea here is to make it easier to lead the study, not to be too directive. Allow the mitras to come up with their own answers, and then clarify and round out the discussion with the suggested answers and comments if you find them helpful.

Suggested approach

The suggested approach to these two weeks is to discuss each extract one by one, focussing on the questions for discussion at the end of each one. Start the discussion of each extract by getting someone to read it aloud. Then discuss the questions. Ask the mitras to write down their answers to the questions before the session – they will get most out of this material if they clarify their thinking enough to commit their ideas to writing, rather than having just a vague idea of something to say.

It would be a good idea to start each of these two sessions by invoking a devotional atmosphere, which is the appropriate setting for this sort of sūtra material. One idea would be to begin both weeks by chanting the Mañjuḥoṣa mantra, then perhaps chanting the first extract from the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā*, using the line breaks suggested here:

Call forth as much as you can

Of love, of respect and of faith!

Remove the obstructing defilements,

*And clear away all your taints!
Listen to the Perfect Wisdom of the gentle Buddhas,
Taught for the weal of the world,
For heroic spirits intended!*

The rest of this study leaders' material for these two weeks consists of the sutra extracts, the comments on these given to the mitras, plus comments on some of the questions. Also included is one short sutra from the Pāli Canon you can pull out of the hat to answer one of the questions/exercises. Obviously you should also read the Introduction to the material for students.

The references to the sutra extracts are given in the material for mitras.

Week 3: Prajñā-Pāramitā Part 1

Topic 1 – the role of śraddhā and devotion

Extract 1: from the Ratnaguṇasamcayagāthā

*“Call forth as much as you can of love, of respect and of faith!
Remove the obstructing defilements, and clear away all your taints!
Listen to the Perfect Wisdom of the gentle Buddhas,
Taught for the weal of the world, for heroic spirits intended!”*

Thus begins what, according to Sangharakshita, might be the oldest and original Prajñā-Pāramitā text.

Question: *Why might the whole Prajñā-Pāramitā tradition begin by asking us to call forth love, respect and faith? What difference might this make to the effect the teachings have on us?*

Firstly, if we are approaching a source of ultimate wisdom, we do well to put ourselves in an appropriate relationship to it, by recognising that it is greater than we are, and therefore being willing to put our own opinions to one side and be receptive to something higher and deeper than we are. Secondly, the predominantly cognitive approach of the Prajñā-Pāramitā perhaps needs to be tempered by cultivating some positive emotion. Thirdly, as we saw last week these teachings could, if taken wrongly, carry the danger of nihilism, and a devotional attitude will tend to counteract that.

Extract 2: from the ‘Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines’

“The Buddha: ‘It is through the might of the Buddhas, of the Tathāgatas, that the Bodhisattvas study the Perfection of Wisdom, and that they make progress in training in Suchness. For it is in the nature of things that the Buddhas, who stand, hold and maintain themselves in immeasurable and incalculable world-systems, should bring to mind and uphold everyone who teaches and studies this perfection of wisdom. The Buddhas will bring them to mind and assist them. And it is quite impossible to cause an obstacle to someone who has been brought to mind and upheld by the Buddhas.’

Śāriputra: ‘It is through the Buddhas’ might, sustaining power and grace that Bodhisattvas study this deep perfection of wisdom, and progressively train in Suchness?’

The Buddha: ‘So it is Śāriputra. They are... sustained and seen by the Tathāgata, and the Tathāgata beholds them with his Buddha-eye.’ ”

Question: *Do you think that anyone who saw the Perfection of Wisdom in this way would be more in danger of falling into the extremes of nihilism, or of eternalism?*

Question: *Do you find this an inspiring idea or an example of Buddhism sliding into irrational religiosity? Do you think you yourself are more in danger of falling into the extremes of nihilism or of eternalism?*

Re both these questions: The Indian context of the Prajñā-Pāramitā teachings seems to have been highly devotional, and therefore hardly nihilistic. In fact the eternalistic ideas of Hinduism were likely to have been influential, even on some Buddhists. In this situation the Madhyamaka and the Prajñā-Pāramitā could perhaps afford to deconstruct spiritual values, without too much danger of nihilism – and perhaps needed to do so to restore the Middle Way. Our situation is quite different, because most of us have a nihilistic background, so we need to beware of the danger of taking these teachings in a negative way.

Topic 2 – The emptiness of all things

Extract 3: from the Ratnaguṇasamcayagāthā

*“Both I and Mine as Dharmas are unreal and empty.
By his own self has the fool become entangled in space.
As someone who suspects he has been poisoned
May well be struck down, although no poison has got into his stomach,
Just so the fool who has admitted into himself the notions of I and Mine
Is forced by that unreal notion to undergo birth and death again and again.
Those who have these notions are defiled.
Those who have no thought of I and Mine are purified.
But there is no-one who is defiled, and no-one who is cleansed.”*

The last line is the sort of paradox that can be created by switching between the absolute and relative levels of truth – which the Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras delight in.

Question: *Which of the two aspects of sūnyatā mentioned last week does this extract relate to?*

Pudgala-nairātmya, the absence of self in persons. The other one is *dharmā-nairātmya*, the absence of self in dharmas, which is raised in the later extracts.

Question: *How do you respond to the analogies used here: the idea that we get tangled up in space (or the sky – the Sanskrit word is the same), and the idea that our situation is like that of someone who gets ill because they just think they have taken poison? Do these help you to get a feel for what is being said?*

Extract 4: from the Heart Sutra

*“The Holy Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara was coursing in the deep wisdom that has gone beyond. He looked down from on high and saw only the five skandhas, and that they were empty of own-nature.
Here, Śāriputra, form is emptiness
And that emptiness is form.
Form does not differ from emptiness,
Emptiness does not differ from form.”*

These are some of the most famous lines in all Buddhist literature. They deserve some reflection.

Question: *What does the fact that Avalokiteśvara saw only the five skandhas mean?*

Avalokiteśvara saw only the transient skandhas, and not the usual commonsense collection of selves and things. Hence he saw *pudgala-nairātmya*.

Question: *Why is the fact that the skandhas are empty of own-nature important?*

Having deconstructed our usual commonsense view of reality by means of the idea of skandhas, if we are to see the truth rather than remaining trapped in concepts we then need to deconstruct the skandhas themselves, seeing that they too lack self-nature. The Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras usually refer to the skandhas as ‘dharmas’ – they do not limit the term to the Abhidharmic categories – so this would be seen as an aspect of *dharmā-nairātmya*, the absence of self in dharmas.

Question: *Why is it significant that these words are addressed to Śāriputra?*

Śāriputra is closely associated with the Abhidharmic teachings, and in Mahayana Buddhism is used as an example of someone who has reached a certain level of wisdom through practicing the so-called Hīnayāna teachings, but is now stuck because he takes these literally, rather than seeing them as skilful means that needs to be left behind once their usefulness has passed. See Sangharakshita’s commentary on the Heart Sutra in *Wisdom beyond Words* for a fuller discussion.

Question: *What does ‘form’ stand for in the phrase ‘form is emptiness’?*

The skandhas in general.

Question: *Why is it important, not only that ‘form is emptiness’, but also that ‘emptiness is form’, and does not differ from it? (Or, as the version we chant in the pūjā has it, that emptiness is only form?)*

Śūnyatā is not another dimension or an alternative world that we can vanish into – it is this world, seen as it is. At the practical level the fact that ‘emptiness is only form’ reminds us that, however much we see the truth of emptiness, we still need to live a creative life in the everyday world around us – this is the arena for our spiritual life, and the only one there is. The Zen tradition in particular emphasises the importance of the fact that emptiness is only form – and that no matter how much Insight we may have, what matters is engaging in a down-to-earth way with our work and everyday tasks, and with the people and things around us.

Extract 5: from *The Inconceivable State of Buddhahood, in the Ratnakūṭa collection*

“Mañjuśrī said, ‘The five skandhas constitute what we call the mundane world... The basic nature of the five skandhas is emptiness. If that nature is emptiness, there is neither ‘I’ nor ‘mine’. If there is neither ‘I’ nor ‘mine’ there is no duality, there is neither grasping nor abandoning. If there is neither grasping nor abandoning, there is no attachment. Thus, free from attachment, he transcends the mundane world.’ ”

This extract tells us why it is important to see mundane things as empty – because then we will free ourselves from attachment to them. Here this seems to be given more importance than seeing anātman or non-duality, which just lead up to non-attachment!

Question: *Do the Prajñā-Pāramitā extracts we have been looking at give you a sense of the possibility of liberation from our normal worldly concerns – or not?*

Extract 6: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines

“Enlightened beings do not view the world through the framework of the skandhas. But just this non-viewing of the skandhas is the viewing of the world. That is the way in which the world is seen by the Tathāgata. And how does perfect wisdom show up the world for what it is? She shows that the world is empty, unthinkable, calmly quiet, and pure in itself.”

This extract points us towards the reason why, at the highest levels of the Path, it is important to see the unreality of the skandhas. If we see the world through the lens of the skandhas, or of any other any system, such as the dharma theory of the Abhidharma, we do not see the world as it is, we see our ideas about it – hence “...just this non-viewing of the skandhas is the viewing of the world.”

However we need to see this statement in its context: it is addressed to experienced practitioners who have already used the meditation on the skandhas to deconstruct their idea of a world consisting of fixed ‘selves’ and ‘things’, and now need to take the final step of leaving behind the raft that got them to where they are. To see the world as consisting of the five skandhas could be a considerable step forward from seeing it in our usual commonsense way as consisting of ‘selves’ and ‘things’.

The extract also hints at the fact that when we drop our ideas about the world and see things as they are, we do not see a cold or meaningless universe, but a mysterious and beautiful one: “...unthinkable, calmly quiet, and pure in itself.” This point is taken further in the next extract.

Question: *Can you identify any of the conceptual frameworks through which you tend to view the world? Possible candidates might be political (e.g. socialism), social (e.g. egalitarianism), biological (e.g. Darwinism), psychological, or physical (e.g. materialism). Can you accept that your preferred concepts, while useful in some areas, are merely relative truth, and in some ways distort reality?*

Extract 7: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines

“The Buddha: ‘ “Deep”, Subhuti, that is a synonym for Emptiness, for the Signless, the Wishless... for Nirvana.’

Subhuti: ‘Is it a synonym only of these, or of all dharmas?’

The Buddha: ‘It is a synonym for all dharmas. For form and the other skandhas are deep. How is form deep? As deep as Suchness, so deep is form...’

Subhuti: 'Of what is "immeasurable" a synonym?'

The Buddha: 'Of Emptiness, of the Signless, the Wishless.'

Subhuti: 'Only of these and not of the other dharmas?'

The Buddha: 'Have I not described all dharmas as "empty"? And that which is emptiness, that is also immeasurableness. Therefore no difference can be apprehended between these dharmas. As mere words have they been described by the Tathāgata.'

Subhuti: 'It is wonderful how the Tathāgata has shown the true nature of these dharmas, and yet one cannot properly talk about the nature of these dharmas.'

The Buddha: 'So it is, for one cannot properly express the emptiness of dharmas in words.' "

The word 'dharmas' is sometimes used in these sutras in a technical sense, to mean the supposedly fundamental elements of existence as described by the *Abhidharma*. But often it is used to mean something more like 'things' or 'phenomena', which are summed up by the skandhas. Although it is not precisely accurate, for the sake of understanding we could translate 'all dharmas' to ourselves as 'all things'. So the sutra is saying in effect that all things are deep and immeasurable, profound and infinite, mysterious and beyond our comprehension.

This extract illustrates the fact that seeing the truth of *sūnyatā* leads to an experience of the indescribable mystery and wonder of all things, and not to a nihilistic, meaningless universe. Emptiness, the sutra tells us, far from being a negative quality, is a synonym for deep and immeasurable. This vision of all things as mysterious, wonderful and full of potential is something that opens up most fully in meditation, and neither the *Prajñā-Pāramitā* literature nor the ideas of the *Madhyamaka* can have the desired spiritual effect unless they are combined with meditation and devotional practice.

The mysterious, deep and immeasurable nature of things is inexpressible, so the sutra uses a nonsense word to describe it – Suchness (*tathāta*) or 'the way things are'. Things are just 'such' – the way they are! We will come across the idea of Suchness again later in this section.

Question: *Have you ever had an inkling that the world is inexpressibly mysterious and 'deep'? If so, in what circumstances did this occur? How could you create the conditions to experience this again, and to deepen this vision?*

Question: *What are 'Emptiness, the Signless, and the Wishless'? How are they related to *sūnyatā* and the lack of own-nature in things?*

Of course these are the Three Samadhis, which we are said to reach when we penetrate deeply into the truth of the Three Lakṣaṇas. The *sūnyatā samādhi* is

reached when we see the truth of anātman. The signless Samadhi is reached when we see the truth of impermanence. The wishless Samadhi is reached when we see the truth of dukkha. The three are closely related, and the sutras see them as three aspects of the same thing. The signless Samadhi means seeing that things have no ‘sign’, or permanent, distinctive quality of their own, which is the same as seeing the absence of own-nature or *svabhāva* in things, and leads inevitably to the conclusion that they have no real self. Seeing the ‘signlessness’ of things also leads to the realisation that they do not have the qualities we attribute to them, so cannot give us satisfaction – and therefore to ‘wishlessness.’ So for the sutra the signless and the wishless are the same as *sūnyatā*, and all three are the same as nirvana. It is not surprising that these are described as deep and infinite. What is really surprising is that these are also seen as the same as ‘all dharmas’, so all dharmas are deep and infinite. Seen properly, all things share the quality of the mysterious and deep reality, which is called Suchness.

Question: *“No difference can be apprehended between these dharmas. As mere words have they been described by the Tathāgata.” Can you describe what this means in your own words?*

As we saw last week, all the ways we divide up reality in order to describe it are arbitrary, depending on ‘false discrimination’. Because for convenience sake we divide one aspect off from the rest of reality and give it a name does not mean that it has any independent existence – it is a ‘mere word.’

Topic 3: Analogies and similes

Extract 8: from the Diamond Sutra

*“As stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp
A mock show, dew drops, or a bubble,
A dream, a lightning flash, or cloud
So should one view what is conditioned.”*

A ‘mock-show’ refers to a magical illusion, as when a magician makes his audience see something that does not exist. A more poetic but less literal translation of this famous verse is the following:

*“So you should view all of the fleeting worlds:
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud;
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.”*

Question: *In what ways are conditioned things like:*

- i. A star?*
- ii. A lamp?*
- iii. A magical illusion?*
- iv. Dewdrops?*
- v. A bubble?*
- vi. A lightning flash?*
- vii. A cloud?*

Most of the following explanations can be found in Conze’s book, *Buddhist Wisdom*, which also gives some interpretations not mentioned here.

- i. A star:* Stars cannot be seen when the sun comes out. Similarly the apparently separate, independent things of this world are only seen when our mind is dominated by the darkness of ignorance. When the sun of wisdom arises, we no longer see them. The word used for star also apparently means meteor, so an alternative interpretation would be ‘gone in a flash’.
- ii. A lamp:* The flame of a lamp is not a real entity – it gives the illusion of being a ‘thing’, but is in fact a process. It has no real identity, and the gas that makes it up is never the same for two consecutive moments. Also, a flame does not exist in its own right, but depends on conditions such as fuel, a wick, and air, all of which come together to maintain it.

- iii. *A magical illusion*: In an illusion things appear to exist, but they do not have any real existence, and depend entirely on our deluded state for any reality we give them.
- iv. *Dewdrops*: All things are as transient and evanescent as dewdrops that vanish as soon as the sun comes out.
- v. *A bubble*: A bubble is a fragile, highly transient phenomenon, brought into existence by conditions, and usually lasting just a short time. It may seem large, but it is empty of substance.
- vi. *A lightning flash*: Like a meteor, lightning is literally gone in a flash.
- vii. *A cloud*: Clouds give rise to all sorts of interesting shapes, and we could create all sorts of stories and dramas out of them. But the shape of clouds depends entirely on where we see them from, they are constantly changing to produce new illusions of castles and landscapes and so on, and if we look for the things we see in them we find that they have no solidity or real existence.

Extract 9: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 18,000 Lines

“Form is like a mass of foam, it has no solidity, it is full of cracks and holes, and it has no substantial inner core. Feeling is like a bubble, which swiftly rises and swiftly disappears, and it has no durable subsistence. Perception is like a mirage. As in a mirage of water absolutely no water at all can be found (so there is nothing substantial in that which is perceived). Impulses are like the trunk of a plantain tree: when you strip off one leaf sheath after another, nothing remains, and you cannot lay hand on a core within. Consciousness is like a magical illusion, as when magically created soldiers, conjured up by a magician, are seen marching through the streets.”

This extract repeats many of the analogies used in the last one, but makes them more specific by relating them to particular skandhas. It also introduces some other similes that are very common – foam, a mirage, and the trunk of a banana tree.

Question: *Which of the analogies used in the last two extracts seem most evocative or meaningful to you?*

Question: *Can you think of any other analogies that convey something of the lack of self-nature in things?*

A rainbow is one. It has no real existence, but is an appearance created by the coming together of conditions, one of which is the observer themselves.

Question and exercise: *Do you think that this is a new, Mahayana way of seeing things, or can anything similar be found in the Pāli Canon? Try to find some similar teachings in the earlier texts .(Hint: a good place to start might be by searching for the word ‘foam’ – pheṇa in Pāli.)*

Many of the same similes are used in the Pāli Canon, and nothing really new is being said here. One particularly good example, which I was trying to direct people towards in the exercise, is the *Pheṇa (Foam) Sutta* from the *Sutta Nipāta*. It can be found on the website, *Access to Insight*. Hopefully at least one person will have done their homework, and will bring it along, but in case they haven't, here is a slightly shortened version. *I suggest printing it out separately and giving folk a copy, and also getting someone to read it aloud at this point, because it brings some of the similes alive very well.*

The Pheṇa (Foam) Sutta, from the Saṃyutta Nikāya

“Monks, suppose that a large glob of foam were floating down this Ganges River, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, observe it, and examine it. To him – seeing it, observing it, and examining it – it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a glob of foam? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and examines any form that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him – seeing it, observing it, and examining it – it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in form?

“Now suppose that in the autumn – when it’s raining in fat, heavy drops – a water bubble were to appear and disappear on the water, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, observe it, and examine it. To him – seeing it, observing it, examining it – it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a water bubble? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and examines any feeling that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him – seeing it, observing it, and examining it – it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in feeling?

“Now suppose that in the last month of the hot season a mirage were shimmering, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, observe it, and appropriately examine it. To him – seeing it, observing it, and examining it – it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a mirage? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and examines any perception that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him – seeing it, observing it, and examining it – it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in perception?

“Now suppose that a man desiring heartwood, in quest of heartwood, seeking heartwood, were to go into a forest carrying a sharp ax. There he would see a large banana tree: straight, young, of enormous height. He would cut it at the root and, having cut it at the root, would chop off the top. Having chopped off the top, he would peel away the outer skin. Peeling away the outer skin, he wouldn’t even find sapwood, to say nothing of heartwood. Then a man with good eyesight would see it, observe it, examine it. To him – seeing it, observing it, and examining it – it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a banana tree? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and examines any fabrications that are past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him – seeing them, observing them, and examining them – they would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in fabrications?

“Now suppose that a magician or magician’s apprentice were to display a magic trick at a major intersection, and a man with good eyesight were to see it, observe it, and examine it. To him – seeing it, observing it, and examining it – it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in a magic trick? In the same way, a monk sees, observes, and examines any

consciousness that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near. To him – seeing it, observing it, and examining it – it would appear empty, void, without substance: for what substance would there be in consciousness?

“Seeing thus, the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchanted, he grows dispassionate. Through dispassion, he’s released. With release there’s the knowledge, ‘Released.’ He discerns that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’”

That is what the Blessed One said. Having said that, the One Well-Gone, the Teacher, said further:

Form is like a glob of foam;
feeling, a bubble;
perception, a mirage;
fabrications, a banana tree;
consciousness, a magic trick –
this has been taught
by the Kinsman of the Sun.
However you observe them,
appropriately examine them,
they’re empty, void
to whoever sees them appropriately.

Beginning with the body...
form is rejected, cast aside...

That’s the way it goes:
it’s a magic trick,
an idiot’s babbling...
No substance here is found.

Thus a monk, persistence aroused,
should view the skandhas
by day and by night,
mindful, alert...

Extract 10: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines

“If a Bodhisattva even in his dreams sees that all dharmas are like a dream, then that should be known as the irreversible mark of an irreversible Bodhisattva.... And immediately after he has woken up from his dream, he reflects, ‘Like a dream is all this that belongs to the triple world. And in that sense shall I teach about dharmas.’ ”

This extract takes one particular analogy further – that our experience of the world is like a dream. This analogy is often invoked in Mahayana Buddhism, and seems particularly apt in view of the fact that the name Buddha means ‘one who is awake’ – and therefore one who sees dreams for what they are. We probably have all had the experience of waking up from a dream into another level of reality and being profoundly relieved that what we had been experiencing was not real. The dream analogy implies that we could awaken from our current experience to a higher level of reality in a similar way – and maybe with an even greater sense of release and liberation.

Question: *What similarities do you see between dream experience and the world as described by the Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras?*

In a dream nothing is really separate and independent of everything else. Nothing has real existence. All our pleasures and pains in a dream are illusory. The dream is a delusory reality in which we are in a sense trapped (although we create it ourselves), and if we realise its delusory nature we can be much more free to enjoy it for what it is.

Question: *Have you ever had the experience of lucid dreaming – knowing that you were dreaming while still in the dream state? If so, how did this feel? Can you imagine what it might be like to have a similar experience in waking life? Do you think this might be a bit like the experience of Insight?*

Week 4: Prajñā-Pāramitā Part 2

Topic 4 - Absolute and relative truth

Extract 11: from the Diamond Sutra

The Buddha said to Subhuti, “ All the bodhisattva-mahāsattvas, who undertake the practice of meditation, should cherish one thought only: ‘When I attain perfect wisdom, I will liberate all sentient beings in every realm of the universe...’

And yet although immeasurable, innumerable and unlimited beings have been liberated, truly no being has been liberated. Why? Because no Bodhisattva who is a true Bodhisattva entertains such concepts as a self, a person, a being, or a living soul. Thus there are no beings to be liberated, and no self to attain perfect wisdom.

As we have already pointed out, the Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras delight in creating paradoxes by switching between the absolute and relative levels of truth. The paradox created in this extract is one that crops up again and again, epitomising the apparent conflict between the merely relative truth of the Dharma – in this case expressed as the Bodhisattva Path – and the absolute truth of śūnyatā. The practitioner must somehow transcend this paradox, wholeheartedly working to save all beings, while at the same time seeing that no beings can really be said to exist. The implication of this for us is that to practice effectively we need to have what we might call ‘stereo vision’ – we need to keep both relative and absolute truth in view at the same time. We must not abandon the raft of the Dharma before we reach the other shore, but at the same time we must remember not to take it completely literally.

Question: *Why does a Bodhisattva entertain no such “...concept as a self, a person, a living being, or a soul”?*

Hopefully that should be obvious by now.

Extract 12: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines

Śāriputra: “Is there then no attainment, is there no Nirvana?”

Subhuti: “There is attainment, there is Nirvana, but not in the ultimate sense. It is by means of worldly conventional expressions that one conceives of attainment and Nirvana, of stream-entrants, and of all the other grades of achievement up to the Buddha – and not in the ultimate sense...”

Śāriputra: “And in the same way, also, do we differentiate the five realms of rebirth only by worldly conventional expression, and in the ultimate sense they do not exist?”

Subhuti: “So it is Śāriputra. Because in the ultimate sense there is neither karma nor karma-vipāka... neither defilement nor purification.”

This extract is even more explicit than the last – the teachings, practices, and grades of attainment talked about by the Buddhist tradition belong to the realm of conventional truth only, and have no reality in the ultimate, absolute sense. In a sense the sutra illustrates this for us by mentioning the five realms of rebirth – we usually think of there being six realms, so clearly there is something relative and arbitrary about the teaching! But the extract goes on to tell us that even the law of karma – the cornerstone of the traditional view of *pratītya samutpāda* – is also only true at the conventional level.

Question: *Can you express in your own words what the sutra means by saying that the teachings of Buddhism are relative truth? Does this mean that they are not true?*

It is important for folk to see that this does not mean that the teachings are not ‘true’. It means that they are based on words and concepts, which cannot convey the wordless Insight pointed to by terms like *śūnyatā* and Suchness. But then, neither does anything else in our lives, and the relative teachings of Buddhism are more ‘true’ than our concerns about our finances, popularity, status, or security, or than our other purely relative and conventional ideas about philosophy, politics, society, or science.

Question: *Which do you think is more important for us to focus on – the relative truth of the teachings of Buddhism, or the absolute truth of śūnyatā?*

This question is answered by the next extract, which tells us to get on and practice the relative teachings, and that only in that way will we realise the ultimate truth.

Extracts 13 and 14: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines

Subhuti: “How should a Bodhisattva who is only just beginning stand in perfect wisdom, how train himself?”

The Buddha: “He should tend, love and honour the good friends kalyana mitras, or spiritual friends. His good friends are those who will instruct and admonish him in perfect wisdom, and will expound to him its meaning. They will expound it as follows: ‘Come here, son of good family, make endeavours in the six perfections.’

Subhuti: “How should a Bodhisattva train, if he wants to go forth to full and perfect Enlightenment?”

The Buddha: “The Bodhisattva should adopt an even attitude towards all beings, with a mind that is friendly, well disposed, free from aversion, avoiding harm or hurt. He should treat others as if they were his own mother, father, son or daughter... He should abstain from all evil, give

gifts, guard his morality, perfect himself in patience, exert vigour, enter into the dhyānas, achieve mastery over wisdom, survey conditioned co-production... and encourage others to do the same. In the same way he should stand in everything from meditation on the four noble truths to the stage when he realises that it is as a Bodhisattva that he will be saved. When he longs eagerly for all that, and trains himself in it, then everything will be uncovered for him.”

These extracts make it clear that, although the teachings of Buddhism have no more absolute reality than anything else that can be expressed in words, we still need to train ourselves wholeheartedly in them if we want to get anywhere. It is through these very teachings and practices – relative as they are - that the ultimate Perfect Wisdom will be ‘uncovered’ for us. Hence we are told to remember the importance of spiritual friendship – and told that our real spiritual friends will remind us to practice *all* the Six Perfections, not just wisdom. Then we are told to cultivate mettā, and again reminded to practice all of the Six Perfections – ethics, generosity, patience, effort, and meditation - and not just wisdom. Elsewhere in the same sutra the Buddha also recommends, among other things, the practice of the Brahma Vihāras, keeping the Ten Precepts adopted by Order Members, and teaching the Dharma to others as part of a practice of dāna. It is only when we have practiced these things to the utmost that we will genuinely have the vision to see through them. Until then our understanding that Buddhism is only relative truth is just intellectual – just more play words and conceptual castles-in-the-air. The Buddha’s parable from the Pāli Canon makes the issue clear – until we reach the further shore we desperately need the raft, and should hang on to it tightly!

Question: *If the Perfection of Wisdom teachings do not make any practical difference to the way we practice, why do we bother with them?*

All the Perfections are said to depend on an element of the practice of wisdom if they are to be real perfections, or ways to the other shore. A bit of the śūnyatā perspective changes the attitude with which we practice, and therefore changes the effect the practices have on our mind and heart.

Extract 15: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 50,000 Lines

Śāriputra: “What is the worldly, and what is the supramundane perfection of generosity?”

Subhuti: “The worldly perfection of giving consists in this: The Bodhisattva gives liberally to all those who ask, while thinking in terms of real things. He thinks: ‘I give. That one receives. This is the gift. I renounce all my possessions without stint. I act as the Buddha commands. I practise the perfection of giving.’ Tied by three things he gives a gift. Which three? A perception of self, a perception of others, a perception of the gift.”

“The supramundane perfection of giving, on the other hand, consists of the threefold purity. What is the threefold purity? Here a Bodhisattva gives a

gift, and he does not apprehend a self, a recipient, or a gift. Neither does he apprehend a reward of his giving. He surrenders that gift to all beings, but he apprehends neither beings nor self... That is called the supramundane perfection of giving.”

All the other perfections are said to be based on the Perfection of Wisdom. They need to be performed with at least a hint of the open, spacious attitude of wisdom if they are to be truly Pāramitās, in the sense of ways to transcend the self. This extract illustrates the difference that the wisdom perspective makes to just one Pāramitā – that of dāna, or generosity.

Question: *What difference might practising dāna with the ‘supramundane’ perspective make, compared to doing so with the worldly perspective?*

It would be a more expansive and spontaneous experience, compared to the more dutiful approach of acting ‘as the Buddha commands’. To the extent that we can invoke an element of śūnyatā, practices such as dāna will be an expression of the reality of things, not a duty. Without some wisdom, our attempts to practice dāna and compassion will become mere do-goodery or self-martyrdom, and we are likely to burn out or become resentful. Without vision our attitudes to our altruistic efforts are likely to be heavy and dutiful, with nothing of the lila of the Bodhisattva about them. We need to bring an element of the vision of śūnyatā into our practice at some point – so, without going overboard, why not start now?

Question: *Can you guess what the difference might be between the worldly and the supramundane practice of any of the other Perfections?*

For one example, the practice of kṣānti, instead of being a question of bearing with equanimity the dukkha cause to the self by other selves, is said to be practiced with no sense of a separate self that experiences dukkha or another self that causes dukkha.

Topic 5 – Spiritual attainments

Extract 16: from the Diamond Sutra

“Subhuti, what do you think? Does a srotāpanna (stream-entrant) think, ‘I have entered the stream?’”

Subhuti said, “No, World-Honoured One, he does not. Why? Because while srotāpanna means ‘entering the stream’, there is no entering here.”...

“Subhuti, what do you think? Does an arhat think, ‘I have obtained arhatship?’”

Subhuti said, “No, World-Honoured One, he does not. Why? Because there is no dharma that can be called an arhat. If an arhat thinks, ‘I have obtained arhatship’, this means that he has the idea of an ego-self, a person, a living being, or a soul.”

“Although the Buddha has said that I am the foremost of those who have obtained the Samadhi of Detachment, that I am the foremost of those arhats who are liberated from unwholesome desires, I cherish no thought that I have obtained arhatship. If I did he would not have said of me, ‘Subhuti, who is the foremost of those who dwell in peaceful abiding, does not dwell anywhere, that is why he is called a dweller in peace.’”

Here is another of those paradoxes that the Perfection of Wisdom sutras love so much: if anyone thinks of themselves as a stream entrant or an arahant, they cannot be so. This we are told follows from the fact that those with real Insight no longer think of themselves as separate beings – they no longer think of a self to which the attainment could be attached. It also follows from the ideas in the last section about the merely relative truth of the Buddhism, which must include the various grades of attainment described by different traditions. The stages of the path are as arbitrary as any other divisions of reality. Elsewhere in the Prajñā-Pāramitā texts the Buddha says that someone with Insight does not see any dharma that could attain stream entry, and does not see any real dharma called stream entry that could be attained.

Question: *Can you imagine – even very vaguely – what it might be like to not see the world in terms of self-and-other? Can you think of any analogies or metaphors that might communicate a glimpse of what this might be like?*

Question: *Does the merely relative truth of the stages of the path help to resolve the apparent discrepancy in the way these are described by different traditions – for example, how does it help us overcome the problems in correlating stream entry with the arising of the Bodhicitta?*

If we take the different systems literally, as absolute truth, it is difficult to see how, for example, stream entry and the arising of the Bodhicitta can be correlated, or the other stages of the Arahant and Bodhisattva paths. If we see these paths as

just being approaches to the truth we can tolerate some discrepancies, taking the discrepancies in our stride. One aim of the Prajñā-Pāramitā teachings seems to be to give us a bit of intellectual humility, so that we never think we have got everything worked out in a cut-and-dried way. If we can accept that we do not know the absolute truth, then we can accept provisional, relative truth as the closest we can get, at same time acknowledging that it is not the whole story.

Question: *What do you think the Buddha meant when he said that Subhuti was the foremost of those who dwell in peace because he ‘does not dwell anywhere’?*

‘Does not dwell anywhere’ is presumably a way of saying that he has not tried to make a stable home for himself in the flux of pratīya samutpāda by clinging to a self, the possessions of a self, the personal opinions of a self, and so on. Elsewhere the sutras talk about not ‘settling down anywhere.’ There is an implication that it is this sort of ‘not dwelling anywhere’ that is really important, not the physical fact of homelessness.

Extract 17: from the Heart Sutra

“Therefore, Śāriputra, because of his non-attainment, having relied on Perfect Wisdom, a Bodhisattva lives without mental hindrances. Without mental hindrances he is fearless and imperturbable, he is beyond upside-down views, and he attains Nirvana.”

Question: *Can you spot the paradox in this extract? Which aspect of the paradox represents relative truth, and which represents absolute truth?*

If you strip out the middle of the extract, you get: ‘*Therefore, Śāriputra, because of his non-attainment... he attains Nirvana*’. Because of non-attainment, he attains. The attainment is in the realm of relative truth, the fact that it is not really an attainment is the absolute truth.

Question: *At the very highest level of the spiritual path, how might aiming for attainment prevent it happening? Is aiming for attainment a good idea for those at our level?*

If the higher levels of attainment are about going beyond the desires of the self, then a self-referential desire for a spiritual attainment is going to prevent the very thing that is desired. This is probably not very relevant to our stage of the path – we probably still have some work to do before we are ready for complete spiritual death, and need the force of a relatively healthy desire to drive us onwards. At the same time, if we focus on spiritual goals in a crassly egocentric way – for example wanting ordination for the kudos it gives us, or wanting meditation experiences as a sort of blissful drug experience, for the pleasure they give – then desire for attainment may still be an obstacle to attainment.

Extract 18: from *The Inconceivable State of Buddhahood, in the Ratnakūṭa collection*

Then Subhuti asked these monks, “Elders, according to your understanding, have you ever achieved or realised anything?”

The monks replied, “Only presumptuous persons will claim that they have achieved and realised something. To a humble religious devotee, nothing is achieved or realised. How then, would such a person think of saying to himself, ‘This I have achieved; this I have realised?’ If such an idea occurs to him, then it is a demon’s deed... Only the Buddha, the World-Honoured One, and Mañjuśrī, know our achievement and realisation.”

Question: *How should we relate to goals like stream entry, in view of what is said about them here?*

This was touched on in the last question. As with the rest of the conventional, relative truth of Buddhism, we need to think in terms of the merely relative truth of spiritual goals for the practical purposes of our own progress along the path. We need to commit wholeheartedly to spiritual goals, and use the motivation this gives us. At the same time we should not have a literalistic attitude to these ‘attainments’. We certainly should not think of claiming spiritual attainments for ourselves, and we should take the claims of those who do with a large pinch of salt.

Question: *If the very people who claim spiritual attainments are precisely those who we can be certain do not have them, how do we know who to respect and listen to?*

Perhaps we should look at how people live, rather than giving too much weight to spiritual claims. We might ask, is their life mainly centred on themselves and their own wants and dislikes, or does there seem to be a larger perspective behind the way they live, making it more about others and the more general good? Do their actions seem to indicate that they have gone a bit beyond greed, hatred and delusion? Presumably even that won’t be foolproof, and at some point we need to make a bit of a leap of faith, based on a combination of intuition and experience.

Topic 6: ‘Suchness’ and the nature of the Buddha

Extract 19: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines

From the very beginning Subhuti the Elder has been born after the image of the Tathāgata’s Suchness (tathāta). Because the Suchness of the Tathāgata and the Suchness of all dharmas are the same, and they are both the Suchness of Subhuti the Elder...

Subhuti’s Suchness is immutable and unchangeable, undiscriminated and undifferentiated, just as the Suchness of the Tathāgata. For the Suchness of the Tathāgata, and the Suchness of all dharmas, they are both one single Suchness, not two, not divided...

And for that reason, although we seem to have a duality when Subhuti has been conjured up from the Suchness of the Tathāgata, nevertheless nothing real has been lopped off that Suchness, which remains unbroken...

The Suchness of Subhuti is therefore just the same as the Suchness of all Dharmas. Subhuti the Elder has undergone the experience of that Suchness by imitating in himself the unaltered Suchness, but in actual fact no-one anywhere has undergone a process of imitation...

And that is the Suchness through which a Bodhisattva, when he has definitely won full Enlightenment, comes to be called a Tathāgata . Such-gone, or Such-come.

As we said earlier, Suchness is a sort of nonsense word used to point to the mysterious, inexpressible quality of all things, which is elsewhere described as deep and infinite. Things and beings lack the sort of fixed, independent qualities that we ascribe to them, but they all share one quality, which we could call ‘the nature of things’. We can only know this by direct experience, for example in meditation. And we cannot sensibly say much about it, so we invent a word that points to it, but does not falsify it by seeming to describe it. An analogy might be the colour blue. We know the colour by direct experience, and anything we say about it, such as that it is cool (like water) or warm (like a summer sky) will be no help in letting someone who is colour-blind experience it. So we might just call its quality ‘blueness’, which only means something if we have experienced it. In the same way the quality of reality is called Suchness (*tathāta*.) The Buddha is often referred to as the Tathāgata, which can be translated as ‘The One Who Comes From, or Goes To, Suchness’. The Prajñā-Pāramitā texts seem to interpret this to mean that the Buddha shares the quality of reality, and so he IS reality.

Question: *Does the extract mean that ‘all is one’?*

The Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras are certainly encouraging us to stop seeing the world as a collection of unconnected things and beings – so for example the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā* says that the first quality of an irreversible Bodhisattva is that, “They are free from the perception of multiplicity.” But what the PP

sutras are getting at does not seem to be the same as what is usually meant when people say ‘all is one.’ What people usually mean by this that there is some sort of metaphysical or theistic essence behind the world – usually ‘the godhead’ – which everything expresses. Neither *sūnyatā* nor Suchness are such an essence – they are the characteristic of all things, not an essence behind all things.

The difference is illustrated by the change we have made to the version of the Heart Sutra that we chant in Triratna. This used to say ‘All things are the Primal Void’, but to reflect the meaning more accurately this was changed to ‘All things are by nature void.’ The Primal Void sounds like an essence behind everything, but in fact what the sutra is saying is that all things have the characteristic of *sūnyatā*. I think that in this as in other things the Dharma points us to a middle way, this time between seeing everything as separate, and seeing everything as a homogeneous ‘one’. We need to combine the wisdom of sameness with the discriminating wisdom that sees and appreciates the unique individual qualities of things. But because most of us are strongly conditioned to see everything as separate, perhaps we need to practice seeing things more as ‘one’ for a while as a skilful means - and maybe this is what the extract is encouraging us to do. The passage could be used to justify all sorts of all-is-one and/or eternalistic ideas, but the sutras do sometimes allude to a positive spiritual reality behind all the negations.

Question: *Can you see any other meanings in this extract?*

One possible interpretation is that Subhuti, and by implication all beings, is not different from the Buddha. This could be taken to mean that he is in a sense already a Buddha, or that he has Buddha Nature. This seems to foreshadow the *Tathāgatagarbha* doctrine that we will look at in week 6. But note that Subhuti seems to have needed to practice to realise this Suchness – he has, “Undergone the experience of that Suchness by imitating in himself the unaltered Suchness.” He imitated the Suchness of the Buddha, he didn’t get there just by thinking he was already a Buddha.

Week 5: The Yogācāra

Questions for reflection and discussion

Q1: Do you think the mind-only idea is absurd? Why, or why not?

Q2: In the text we suggest two analogies that could illustrate how things could be 'mind-only' – our dream experience, and virtual reality. Can you think of any others?

One traditional one is the magic show, in which a magician conjures up illusions that everyone sees, but that aren't really there. Unfortunately modern stage magicians seem to have lost the knack of doing this, so this may not convey much. A more accessible simile for some people might be drug experiences – these can be very vivid and convincing. Some subtler analogies include the rainbow and the water seen in a mirage, which depend for their existence on the perceptual apparatus of the perceiver, and have no existence independent of this.

Q3: Does the mind-only idea appeal to you at the emotional level? Why, or why not?

Q4: In your own words, what might be some advantages of seeing things as mind-only? What might be some dangers?

The possible advantages are given a fairly thorough going-over in the text. There are some possible downsides that aren't mentioned however:

- For some types of people, it might reinforce a tendency to not engage with the outer world of things, tasks, challenges, responsibilities, and people. It might be worth pointing out that even in dreams we need to engage with the reality we experience – often that seems to be the point, and if we don't act, the same challenge is presented to us again in another, probably more extreme form.
- For some people, it might lead them to put too much importance on their own feelings and inner world, and to deny the existence of any objective truth that transcends their feeling about things. The need to rise above our feelings in order to deal with objective reality leads us to grow. If we don't do this we descend into a precious, deluded preoccupation with our own mental states.

Q5: Do you think you would benefit from training yourself to see the world more as mind, and less as matter? If so, how could you go about doing this? Are there any practices you would like to take on, perhaps for a limited period, to experiment with this approach?

This will depend on the person's temperament – including whether they might fall into either of the traps described in the suggested answer to the last question - and whether they tend more to towards eternalism or nihilism. Some ways of training

ourselves to see things more this way are described in the text, including the idea of reflecting on the dreamlike nature of our experience as part of our meditation practice.

Q6: *How do you pollute the river of the ālaya vijñāna? How could you make it purer and more alive?*

Obviously unskillful actions, words and thoughts pollute our mind. The input that we give our minds from films, the media and so on can also have a big effect – if we expose ourselves to a lot of violent, craving-inducing, negative, or just plain trivial input, we will pollute the river of our mind. This could lead to a discussion of how we manage what we put into our minds. We can purify and enrich the stream of our minds by meditating, spending time with skillful, positive people, putting ourselves in positive circumstances, reading the Dharma, and exposing ourselves to beauty, whether natural or artistic.

Q7: *Is the ālaya vijñāna the same as an eternal soul? How is it similar, and how is it different?*

The basic ‘ālaya mark 1’ described by Asaṅga and Vasubhandu is very different from the normal idea of an eternal soul. It is not a permanent entity, in that it is constantly changing, like the water of a river. So it does not have an ‘essence’ of its own that makes it what it is; it does not have ‘inherent existence’, any more than any of the other changing manifestations of pratītya samutpāda. On the other hand the ‘undefiled ālaya’ described by the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, which is such an important feature of some Far Eastern schools, does seem to be eternal and unchanging. But this ālaya seems to be transpersonal – it does not belong to any individual, but is the basis for all our minds. Hence it is more like ‘the Godhead’ than an individual soul.

Q8: *How are teachings such as anitya, anātman, and the law of karma paratantra? Can you think of any other teachings that seem to you definitely to be paratantra, rather than merely parikalpita.*

Anātman, anitya and the law of karma follow directly from pratītya samutpāda – as explained in the first session – so they are in accord with how things are, and therefore paratantra. Other ‘developmental’ practices, such as the mettā bhāvanā and the practice of ethics, also reflect the fact that conditions bring about change in us according to karma-vipāka, so would seem to be paratantra.

Q9: *Why might the following statement reflect a parikalpita rather than paratantra way of seeing the world? “We should accept ourselves for what we are, rather than trying to change ourselves.”*

It assumes that we have an essential, inherent self which we should ‘accept’, rather than merely being a bundle of rather arbitrary habits that we can change by manipulating conditions. As this inherent self is ‘imaginary’, the idea of acceptance based on it is also parikalpita.

**Week 6: The Tathāgatagarbha (Buddha-Essence) Doctrine
And the Role of Mythic Truth**

Questions for reflection and discussion

***Q1:** Do you ever have a sense that your mind is ‘luminous’ underneath its ‘adventitious defilements’? Does your experience in meditation ever give you a sense of this?*

It is important to acknowledge that this is a direct experience for many people. It might be worth discussing whether this experience of ‘luminous’ mind is an experience of dhyāna as the healthy human state, or whether it represents an experience of ‘Buddha-Nature’.

***Q2:** Which of the two parables from the Lotus Sutra described in the text appealed most to you when you first came across it – the story of the rich man’s son that Sangharakshita calls the ‘Parable of the Return Journey’, or the parable of the jewel in the robe? Can you identify why it appealed to you?*

***Q3:** Which parable do you think is a more realistic description of the spiritual life, and why? (Note that this is a different question!)*

The idea is to get people reflecting on the fact that there is a difference between being attracted to an idea and thinking it is true. We might be attracted to a ‘hard’ interpretation of Tathāgatagarbha, for all sorts of reasons, good and bad – including arrogance and laziness, as well as appropriate reasons like needing encouragement. But it might still not be true or useful.

***Q4:** Do you find the Tathāgatagarbha idea inspiring? If so, tell the group how bearing it in mind alters your approach to practice.*

***Q5:** Do you suffer from any of the negative tendencies that the Buddha is said to have taught the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine to counteract, i.e.:*

- *Lack of confidence.*
- *Thinking you are ‘special’.*
- *‘Not seeing others as oneself’.*

Try to be honest!

***Q6:** Are you ever tempted to abandon or reduce your emphasis on ‘developmental’ practices such as the mettā bhāvanā? If so, has this session changed your attitude to these practices? Do you tend to favour a particular practice to the exclusion of others? How often do you do the mettā bhāvanā?*

Q7: *In what way is Sangharakshita's idea of śraddhā as "The response of what is ultimate in us to what is ultimate in the universe." similar to the Tathāgatagarbha idea? In what ways is it different?*

It is similar because the 'what is ultimate in us' seems to reflect the same idea as Buddha-nature. It is different because it also recognises something ultimate outside of us, with which we are in relationship. It is almost inevitable that we will experience the ideal as 'other', because in its fullness it is not part of our present experience.

Q8: *Which of the Mahāyāna visions of reality discussed in this module means most to you?*

Thanks for leading the module - I hope you got something out of it. Feedback (of a reasonably constructive nature!) is appreciated, and may lead to changes – I don't think this course should be graven in stone, and I hope it can be improved over time.

Feedback on the Dharma Training Course

Once you've finished the module, please consider leaving feedback on the DTC on-line forum - a dedicated place for mitra group leaders to make comments, suggestions, and corrections to the new mitra course. This will have two big benefits:

- 1) It collects ideas and information needed to improve the course over time
- 2) It will also be a place where group leaders can find out how others have led or approached a particular module, share good ideas, and so on.

Each group leader needs to get their own username and password to access the forum. If you are a mitra group leader and would like to participate, please e-mail Vajrashura (who has kindly set up the forum) he'll set up an account for you, usually within a day or two. His e-mail is: vajrashura@gmail.com, and the URL of the forum is www.dublinbuddhistcentre.org/DTCforum.