

Lecture 16: Seeing into One's Own Nature and Realizing Buddhahood - Edited Version

Today we come to the fourth and last line of the traditional verse with the help of which we have been trying, during the past few weeks, to gain some insight into the essence of Zen. The line reads, 'Seeing into one's own nature and realizing Buddhahood.' The expression 'one's own nature' corresponds to the Sanskrit svabhava, literally 'own-being' or 'self-nature', and in this context stands for the mind on which the previous line asked us to depend. One could, therefore, also render the line as 'Seeing into one's own mind and realizing Buddhahood.' The word 'and', however, does not appear in the original Chinese. Indeed, I believe the Chinese language dispenses altogether with conjunctions. What one has not divided one is under no necessity of joining together again. Here the omission, as we would regard it, of the word 'and' suggests that 'seeing' into one's own nature or into one's own mind and 'realizing' Buddhahood are not two distinct, even if parallel, activities, but simply different aspects of one and the same spiritual process.

In order to understand how this process takes place let us refer to the Surangama Sutra, one of the most distinguished of the great Mahayana scriptures. The scene of the sutra is laid at Shravasti, in north-western India, in the orchard which Anathapindika, the rich merchant, had acquired from Prince Jeta as a retreat for the Buddha. Soon after the sutra begins the Buddha and his disciples are all invited to a great feast by the king, it being the anniversary of his father's death. At the appropriate time all therefore depart for the palace. Only Ananda, the Buddha's personal attendant, is missing. He has gone out on an errand, and returns only after the others have left. Finding the monastery deserted, and nothing to eat, he takes his almsbowl and goes begging from door to door in the streets of the city. Being a conscientious monk, he begs from all alike, without discriminating between rich and poor, or between high-caste and low-caste, and in this way eventually comes to the house of a low-caste woman called Matangi who has a beautiful daughter called Prakriti. As soon as she sees the young and handsome monk Prakriti falls violently in love with him, and begs her mother to cast a love-spell upon him. This Matangi does. Ananda, though a conscientious monk, is not proof against the assaults of magic, and not only becomes fascinated by the maiden's charms but is lured into the house and into her room.

Meanwhile, the Buddha has returned to his orchard retreat, where he discourses to the king and other notabilities, who have accompanied him back from the palace. Knowing all the time what was happening to Ananda, however, he calls the Bodhisattva Manjushri, the embodiment of wisdom, and bids him go and save Ananda by repeating the Great Dharani at Matangi's house. As soon as Manjushri does this Matangi's spell loses its power, Ananda comes to his senses, and the crestfallen monk and repentant maiden accompany the great bodhisattva back to the feet of the Buddha.

Now all this obviously has an allegorical meaning. To begin with, Matangi is a low-caste woman. She occupies a place, that is to say, at the very bottom of the Indian social system. Since there exists a clear correspondence between the higher and lower castes, on the one hand, and higher and lower states of consciousness, on the other, she may be said to represent the unrecognized or repressed side of one's nature. In Tantric Buddhism, indeed, the low-caste woman is the regular symbol for all the crude, unsublimated psychic energies which, according to this tradition, should not be repressed but brought out into the open and united with one's conscious spiritual attitude. It is also significant that Matangi's daughter is called Prakriti, for Prakriti means 'Nature'. Ananda is very learned and very conscientious but he is not Enlightened. He has not succeeded, that is to say, in integrating the different sides of his own being. Head is still at war with heart, conscious with unconscious. The casting of the spell represents not an assault from without, but rather an attack coming from forces deep within his own unconscious mind, forces with which he has not yet come to terms. Manjushri, of course, represents transcendental wisdom. The conflict between head and heart, reason and emotion, conscious and unconscious mind, can be resolved only by the emergence of a higher faculty, wherein the light of reason and the warmth of emotion are not only fused but raised to the highest possible degree of intensity. Only when the bodhisattva recites the Great Dharani does Matangi's spell lose its power. But this does not mean that the natural forces which the spell represents are simply thrust back into the darkness of the unconscious. Manjushri is no St Michael triumphantly holding down the powers of evil. Manjushri brings Ananda back to the feet of the Buddha. But he brings Prakriti too. In other words, Nature is not to be repressed but recognized, not to be rejected but purified and assimilated.

On coming into the Buddha's presence Ananda prostrates himself before him, confesses his shortcomings, and asks for help. The Buddha says that he will question Ananda, and that the latter should answer spontaneously, without recourse to discriminative thinking. The qualification is important. Ananda is a very learned man, he has 'heard much', but the Buddha does not want him to answer out of his acquired

knowledge, which is after all second-hand, but out of himself, out of his personal perception and realization. He wants him to speak with his own voice, not a borrowed voice. This sort of spontaneity is, of course, very rare. Usually, when questioned on matters of fundamental concern, we reply after much thought and deliberation. That is to say, we reply from a comparatively superficial level of our being, from one made up of accretions from without rather than creations from within, from opinion and hearsay. Only in moments of crisis, or when deeply moved, do we in a sense really speak out. It is this sort of spontaneity, only coming from even deeper, coming from the existential depth of the disciple, that the Zen mondo or 'exchange' between master and disciple, or between one master and another, is designed to elicit. So long as the disciple speaks from anything less than his own true mind, or Buddha-nature, the master remains unsatisfied.

Step by step, relentlessly, the disciple is therefore forced into a corner, into an impasse. All his answers rejected, his mind baffled, his intellectual resources exhausted, in a state of near collapse, he can escape from the impasse only by waking up to the reality of his own true mind, and speaking out from that, saying - whatever comes. Perhaps, indeed, what comes will not be words at all, but a laugh or a smile, a polite bow or a sudden blow. But it must be spontaneous, and it must come from the deepest possible level of his being.

It is in this manner that the Buddha wants Ananda to answer his question, and the question is, 'How did you become interested in Buddhism?' In other words the Buddha recurs to fundamentals. He does not waste time asking Ananda why he was late getting back from his errand, or why he had not kept his eyes firmly fixed on his almsbowl while begging for food at Matangi's house. Instead, like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky comes the question, 'How did you become interested in Buddhism?' As the import of the sutra is universal and timeless, the question is addressed not only to Ananda but to us, not only to the Ananda on the stage of Buddhist history but to the Ananda in our own minds, to that aspect of ourselves which, being unintegrated, is liable, as he was liable, to the attacks of the unconscious. We too need, periodically, to explore the nature of our own commitment, to examine our reasons for following the path to Enlightenment. Are we attracted to Buddhism by its art, or its ethics, or its metaphysics? Was it books that brought us to the feet of the Buddha or the living example of someone we know? Are we in search of psychological security? Has our Buddhist life become a matter of habit and routine? These are the sort of questions we should ask ourselves, and like Ananda we should try to answer them spontaneously.

Well, how did Ananda become interested in Buddhism? The answer that he gives to the Buddha's question is hardly one that it would be possible for anyone to give today. He became interested, he says, because he was impressed by the personal appearance of the Buddha, and because he was convinced that the aureole of transcendently pure and golden brightness which he had seen emanating from his person could not originate in one who was not free from all sexual passion and desire. It was on account of this that he had admired the Buddha and it was this that had influenced him to become one of his true followers.

Approving this declaration, the Buddha then solemnly addresses the whole assembly. Sentient beings have been born and reborn since beginningless time, he tells them, because they have not realized the true Essence of Mind and its self-purifying brightness. On the contrary, they have been engrossed in deluding and transient thoughts which are nothing but falsehood and vanity, thus preparing for themselves the conditions for repeated rebirth. If Ananda is desirous of more perfectly understanding Supreme Enlightenment he must learn to answer questions spontaneously, without recourse to discriminative thinking, for it is by reliance on their intuitive minds that the Buddhas of the ten quarters of the universe have been delivered from the cycle of conditional existence. Having said this, the Buddha asks Ananda a further question. When he saw him, and was impressed by his appearance, how did he perceive him?

Ananda replies that he perceived the Buddha with his eyes and his mind.

And where are these located?

The eyes, like the other sense-organs, are located on the surface of the body, while the mind is hidden within the body.

This does not satisfy the Buddha. He points out that Ananda is now sitting in the hall of the retreat. First he sees the people sitting in the hall, and other things in turn, only afterwards does he see the grove and park outside. Similarly, if Ananda's mind were hidden within his body, in the sense of being spatially located there, he ought to be able to see his own internal organs first and external objects afterwards. Ananda tries again. The mind may, after all, be located outside the body. It may be like a lamp which would illuminate the inside of the room first and then, shining through the doors and windows, illuminate the yard outside.

This, too, fails to satisfy the Buddha. One person's eating does not appease the hunger of all; in the same way, if Ananda's perceiving, understanding mind is really outside his body, then what the mind perceives could not be felt by the body, and what the body feels could not be perceived by the mind. Mind and body are in mutual correspondence, as is proved by the fact that when Ananda's eyes are looking at the Buddha's hand his mind makes discriminations about it. If mind and body are in mutual correspondence, it cannot possibly be said that the mind exists outside the body.

Ananda still thinks the mind must be located somewhere. If it cannot exist either inside or outside the body it must be located somewhere in between. Indeed, it may be concealed within the sense-organ itself. Just as the eye may be covered with a crystal bowl, so the mind may be 'covered' by, or contained within, the eye. Being part of the eye it cannot see the inside of the body, but being concealed within the eye it can clearly perceive external objects.

To this explanation the Buddha objects that if the mind were, in fact, contained within the eye as the eye itself might be covered by a crystal bowl, then the mind ought to perceive the eye before perceiving external objects, just as the eye would see the bowl before seeing mountains and rivers.

In this way the dialogue proceeds. Ananda and the other members of the great assembly eventually realize that the mind, not being a spatially conditioned phenomenon, cannot be located anywhere. There is no time to follow the argument in detail, as step by step the Buddha leads Ananda to the highest realization, but it should already have become evident that the Surangama Sutra is one of the most magnificent of all Buddhist dialogues. Rivalling even Plato in atmosphere and in beauty of setting, its content is even profounder, being nothing else than the progressive revelation of the Buddha's crowning experience, his experience of the highest samadhi.

Now the mind not only cannot be located anywhere, but it does not exist as a thing among things at all. Not being a thing, an object, it cannot really be perceived or seen. But the fourth line of our verse, the line with which we are at present dealing, speaks of seeing into one's own nature, that is to say, into one's mind. Obviously there is a contradiction here. How is it to be resolved?

This brings us to one of the profoundest and most important teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, to a teaching of which Zen, at its best, is simply a practical exemplification. One sees the mind by not seeing. Not being an object of perception but the principle of perception itself, the mind cannot ever be perceived. Whatever is perceived is not the mind. For the mind to try to perceive its own existence is therefore like the tip of the finger trying to touch itself. Whatever is touched is not the finger-tip. The only way in which the finger-tip can possibly 'touch' itself is by withdrawing from all contact with external objects and simply 'feeling' its own existence directly. Similarly with the mind. We can never know it by going after it - with the mind - as though it were an external object distinct from the mind. This is what Zen calls 'using the mind to seek for the mind' and it is quite useless. By following this procedure we may discover many 'minds', but we shall not be able to discover the true mind, the principle of perception itself. The true mind can be found only by not-finding, by realization, that is to say, of a pure non-dual awareness without distinction of subject and object.

What has been said about 'seeing one's own mind' applies with equal force to 'realizing Buddhahood', for, as we have already seen, the two are different aspects of the same process. 'Seeing' corresponds to 'realizing', 'mind' to 'Buddha'. Just as it is ridiculous for the mind to try to see the mind, so it is ridiculous for the mind to try to realize Buddhahood. Zen tells us: You are Buddha. All that we have to do, it declares, is to wake up to the significance of this supreme fact. Devotional practices, scriptural study, even meditation, are ultimately a waste of time. Engaging in them is 'using the Buddha to realize the Buddha', which is like a man's going in search of himself.

Of course it is not easy to wake up. In fact it requires a great deal of effort to do so. First of all we have to realize, however vaguely, that we are asleep. As you sit here listening to these words you are not awake, as perhaps you had imagined, but asleep, sound asleep. Zen is simply a voice crying 'Wake up! Wake up!' Loud and clear though it resounds in your ear, so deep are your slumbers that you hear it but faintly, and coming as it were from a great distance. For five weeks now I have been talking about Zen; yet no one seems to have woken up. Perhaps I have not yet woken up myself. Perhaps I have just been talking in my sleep all this while. However, it sometimes happens that by talking in his sleep one sleeping person may rouse another. Let us hope that as a result of these talks on the essence of Zen something of that nature may have occurred.