

Chapter 2 The Structure of Attainment

Simultaneous Identity and Transformation

In Mahayana thought, one goes out from samsara and attains nirvana, but this at the same time means that one breaks through their duality. Thus, the bodhisattva path is characterized by two contradictory elements. On the one hand, samsara and nirvana or blind passions and enlightened wisdom stand in mutually exclusive opposition. As long as one is possessed of blind passions and false discrimination, one is not enlightened, and in order to attain enlightenment, one must rid oneself of them. Nirvana is attained by negating and transcending samsaric existence. On the other hand, the nirvana thus attained is nondiscriminative wisdom that no longer views samsara and nirvana dichotomously. The bodhisattva realizes wisdom, and through it returns to life in this world.

That worldly existence is not abandoned must not be understood superficially, however, for one does indeed break free of samsara. But while the person who simply dwells in samsara is attached to it and does not seek nirvana, the one who has abandoned samsara to enjoy the bliss of nirvana adheres to nirvana. The true transcendent realm is free of all forms of attachment. Since persons of wisdom are not bound by any clinging, they dwell neither in samsara nor nirvana. Hence, the Mahayana concept of nirvana is “nirvana of no abiding place” (*apratiṣṭhita-nirvana*).

In that bodhisattvas have eradicated discriminative thinking and feeling, they have attained nirvana, but since for them there is no distinction between samsara and nirvana, they do not abandon samsaric existence and remain in nirvana. This is expressed as “not dwelling in Nirvana.” That they do not abandon samsara means that they give rise to discrimination. Through the functioning of discrimination, they distinguish beings and things in samsara, but their thinking and perception differs fundamentally from that of ignorant human beings who take their delusional perceptions to be real. Though they discriminate, and thus they perceive things in their genuine immediacy, yet pervaded by nonexistence. They do not, therefore, impose their own attachments on things, and hence are not tied to samsaric existence.

Though free of samsara, they have experienced the sameness (*samata*) of sentient beings in samsara and themselves. That is, their perception of beings holds the realization that sentient beings’ minds and their own minds—or false discrimination and nondiscriminative wisdom—are one. When the mind thus awakened seeks to relate itself to sentient beings, it is called great compassion. Bodhisattvas go out from samsara and reach nirvana, but without remaining in nirvana compassionately reenter the world of samsara to lead others to awakening. They return to the ordinary life of beings, but their existence is transformed into the life of enlightened wisdom. In attaining this mode of existence lies the fundamental character of the Mahayana path.

The Logical Structure of Realization

As we have seen, in the Prajnaparamita sutras the content of wisdom is expressed, “Form is itself emptiness,” meaning that the world of ordinary experience (samsara) is abolished and at the same time unfolded as things as they are, in their true reality (*tattva*, “it-ness”). “Form is emptiness” does not indicate simple identity, for form (existing things) and emptiness (nonexistence) are mutually contradictory terms. It also implies the process by which form becomes established on the foundation of true existence by passing through a complete negation. Form (self and all things) sinks into emptiness (no subject objects), and at the same time emptiness, limiting itself as form, becomes existing things. There is no form apart from emptiness, no emptiness apart from form. Here lies the realization of prajna, which is not seeing (nondiscrimination) and at the same time seeing (discrimination of nondiscrimination, or things as they are).

In order to clarify the realization of prajna, Nagarjuna teaches the identity of samsara and nirvana by means of a dual negation:

Samsara is without any distinction from nirvana;
Nirvana is also without any distinction from samsara.
(Madhyamaka-karika, xxv, 19)

Here, samsara and nirvana (form and emptiness) are brought into a relationship of nonduality through the negation of each side. The Prajnaparamita formulation of “Samsara is nirvana”—the identity of opposites—is also “neither samsara nor nirvana.” The world of nondiscriminative wisdom is and is not samsara, it is and is not nirvana. This stance is possible, however, only through the religious experience in which nirvana is established through the complete extinction of samsara (discriminative thinking). Nagarjuna therefore teaches a process of thoroughgoing negation by which form (samsara) is made empty (nirvana), for example, in his exposition of eighteen types of emptiness.

Thus, the phrases “Form is emptiness” and “Samsara is nirvana” hold two aspects, reflecting the two dimensions—identity and transformation—of the attainment of wisdom or nirvana. One is that the phrases may be reversed so that they express nonduality: “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form,” “Samsara is nirvana, nirvana is samsara.” Simultaneously, however, these phrases imply a single direction, an irreversible movement “toward emptiness through eradicating form,” “toward nirvana through freeing oneself from samsara.” Here, a transformation occurs in which samsaric existence is eliminated through practice and nirvana is established.¹⁶

¹⁶ The reversible aspect of emptiness is expressed in the Prajnaparamita sutras: “It is not that form is emptied through emptiness; the self-nature of form is emptiness.” The irreversible aspect is seen in Nagarjuna: “Form is broken through and made empty.” The full structure of realization, including both aspects, was articulated by Asanga in *Mahayanasamgraha*. He achieves this by developing a variation of the concept of the three natures and introducing the concept of the “transformation of basis” (*asryaparavrtti*) of the unenlightened person into that of an enlightened one. Samsara and nirvana stand in complete mutual negation, and through practice, samsara is eliminated and nirvana attained. In attainment,

The irreversible aspect, as the dynamic application of the thorough negation expressed “neither samsara nor nirvana” or “neither existence nor nothingness,” indicates the bodhisattva’s deepening practice of nondiscrimination that continues to eradicate false thought and blind passions. It constantly moves toward the ultimate stage of perfect enlightenment. The reversible aspect signifies that this practice of negation, through the realization of suchness with each step, reaches the ultimate at every stage of advance. Hence, the direction of the former aspect is eliminated and all things become seen as they truly are. This is the meaning of Nagarjuna’s statement, “Because of emptiness, all things are established.”

The irreversible, directional aspect, through its conformity with the non-directional aspect, constantly gives up its directionality, and going from samsara to nirvana is actually to return to samsara—or rather, it is never to go anywhere from the very beginning. At the same time, the non-directional aspect, through its conformity with the directional aspect, signifies the movement of deepening and purifying ever more the nirvana or absolute nothingness that forms the basis of samsara or existence. The practice of these mutually contradictory aspects together is prajna or nondiscriminative wisdom.

Practice and Realization

The realization of prajna and the transformation of samsaric existence may be viewed from two opposite perspectives. First, for the practitioner, this transformation does not occur suddenly only once, but involves a long process, from first hearing the teaching and undertaking practice to the attainment of the final stage of Tathagata. Since it is a process, the negation or transcendence of ordinary life through the perfection of not seeing occurs gradually. Nevertheless, at some point the annihilation of blind passions becomes thorough, so that complete liberation from samsara is accomplished and one enters the true transcendent realm. This point is attainment of the stage of nonretrogression and forms the core of transformation. Having once attained the true transcendent realm, one will never fall back into bondage, but will continue to deepen one’s awakening until one attains complete, supreme wisdom.

Second, from the perspective of true reality or nondiscriminative wisdom, the realm of attainment is nondual with every point along the path of practice. This is expressed as nonduality of cause (practice) and result (enlightenment). The distinction between these elements is based on the difference between sentient beings and Tathagata (thus gone one, one who has reached suchness), the distance between them, and points to the process that leads from ignorance to awakening. It is taught, however, that even the place farthest from Tathagata, the first awakening of aspiration at the beginning of the path, is already nondual with the goal of perfect enlightenment.

however, both sides make up a single whole. Although there is no direct influence, this concept of transformation may be compared with Shinran’s. See Yoshifumi Ueda, “The Mahayana Structure of Shinran’s Thought,” Part I (*Eastern Buddhist*, XVII, 1, Spring 1984), pp. 66-68, and Part II (XVII, 2, Autumn 1984), pp. 47-49.

In terms of performing practice, it has been common to interpret emptiness to mean that when all forms and concepts have been broken through, and further emptiness itself has been broken through and made empty, so that true emptiness in which nothing at all remains has been attained, then genuine existence manifests itself. Early masters have stated, however, that breaking through the false is itself the manifesting of truth. Each instance of breaking through false discrimination is always, in itself, the emergence of the true and real, and there is no true reality apart from the false becoming false. At the same time, each stage of practice retains its particular place in the bodhisattva's progress to full realization.

In the *Awakening of Faith*, a compendium of Mahayana thought attributed to Asvaghosha, two contrasting dimensions of enlightenment are distinguished: "original enlightenment," which all beings are said to possess inherently, and "acquired enlightenment," which is attained through performing practices. The movement from unenlightenment to "acquired enlightenment" implies the process by which beings fulfill the cause of awakening, and "original enlightenment" denotes suchness or Buddhahood, the end that is always nondual with the cause.

These terms reflect the understanding of emptiness as both "breaking form and making it empty" (acquired enlightenment) and "form as originally empty" (original enlightenment). In each instance of "emptying" form or abolishing discriminative thinking, one realizes original, transtemporal emptiness. From this perspective, it is meaningless to distinguish different points along the path. Every step from sentient being to Buddhahood has the significance of returning to the origin, of dissolving the path.

This means that suchness is nondual with every sentient being—whether it be an ordinary person, a sage of long religious practice, or a bodhisattva who has realized wisdom. Sentient beings, without awaiting the fulfillment of practice, are from the very beginning Buddhas. We are, however, unaware of this. To become a Buddha is none¹ other than to awaken and return to the original self. For this awakening to be established, our unenlightened, delusional thinking must be extinguished; this is the significance of practice. When enlightenment is attained through the elimination of blind passions, one awakens to the fact that one has possessed this enlightenment originally.

This complex structure of attainment is rooted in the fundamental vision of reality in Mahayana thought that we have considered in this chapter. The nonduality of cause and result arises directly from the nonduality of timeless, uncreated true reality with all karma-created beings. Samsara and nirvana stand in mutual opposition, so that samsara must be eradicated for nirvana to be attained, and at the same time they are one and nondual. In Pure Land Buddhism, this nonduality is developed as the activity of the Buddha in the realm of samsara, opening forth a way by which all beings may attain awakening.