

CHAPTER 2 The Unfolding of Wisdom as Compassion

Reality and wisdom, being essentially one and nondifferent, share a common structure. The complex relationship between form and emptiness or samsara and nirvana—the identity of mutually opposing elements together with the transformation of the former into the latter—also characterizes the relationship between false discrimination and nondiscriminative wisdom. Moreover, this structure clarifies one of the central elements of Mahayana thought: the necessary unfolding of wisdom as compassionate activity in the realm of samsara.

Among the basic Mahayana schools, it was the Yogacara that delineated most clearly the process of practice from the perspective of the practitioner; thus, this school casts the greatest light on the nature and functioning of wisdom in its various stages of development. In Yogacara thought, the bodhisattva's entire career, from first hearing the teaching, is said to be characterized by nondiscriminative wisdom. Three kinds or levels of nondiscriminative wisdom are distinguished—preparatory, fundamental, and subsequently attained.

Practice begins with hearing the teaching of subjectivity-only. The wisdom established by hearing is the shallowest level of nondiscriminative wisdom. Although the term “nondiscriminative” is used, the subjectivity still retains its activity of thought and conception, and it still harbors in its depths the discrimination characterized by the subject-object dichotomy. Thus, although people of this stage seek to realize the teaching of “subjectivity-only with no object” (nondiscriminative wisdom), for them the teaching itself becomes an object of discriminative thought. Such thinking is termed “thoughts and words based on discrimination” (*manojalpa*). Nevertheless, this thinking is also a kind of wisdom—“preparatory” wisdom—because it is born from hearing the teaching, and therefore differs from the inverted and defiled discrimination of samsaric existence.

By advancing from hearing to reflection and practice, one gradually deepens the wisdom of the preparatory stage. The remaining discrimination is eventually eradicated, and the opposition of seer and seen is completely broken through. Objects of thought cease to be established, and even the concept of all things as subjectivity-only ceases to arise. At this point, one realizes fundamental nondiscriminative wisdom. All discriminative thinking vanishes, and one is said to touch (*spr̥sate*) suchness or emptiness. This point also signifies attainment of the stage of non-retrogression, which means that, having once entered the transcendent realm, one will never again fall back into the bondage of samsaric existence.

Attainment of fundamental wisdom or the state of non-retrogression, however, represents only the first of ten great stages in the bodhisattvas' practice. They attain fundamental wisdom through profound contemplative practice, but they remain in complete objectlessness only briefly and soon emerge again into the world of discrimination. Because they have passed through aeons of samsaric existence, a residue of blind passions still remains in

the depths of the mind to be eliminated through the deepening practice of prajna or nondiscrimination. This process is represented by the remaining stages, from the second to the stage of *Tathagata* or supreme Buddhahood. *Tathagata*, a synonym for Buddha, signifies one who has “arrived at” or “emerged from suchness.”

In each of these stages, not only the stage of Tathagata, bodhisattvas reach ultimate reality, for they see suchness at each stage, and the suchness thus seen is always the same. The true transcendent realm is beyond all speech and thought, but after entering, they emerge again into the world of words and thoughts, and then re-enter the realm in which thought is again eradicated. This is performed repeatedly. By doing so, the deep root of samsara and blind passions is thoroughly cut through. In the process, initial attainment of fundamental wisdom and entry into the stage of non-retrogression occurs with the first seeing of suchness; hence it is termed the “path of insight or seeing”. After this, the seeing of suchness is repeated numerous times; this is called the “path of practice.”

Subsequently Attained Wisdom

The bodhisattva’s emergence from fundamental wisdom into the realm of samsara, besides indicating a residue remaining from samsaric existence, possesses another, deeper significance. As we have seen in considering “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form,” true reality in Mahayana thought has a complex and self-contradictory structure whereby what is true and real is inseparable from what is false, illusory, temporary, and unreal. In Yogacara thought, the presence of this structure in the concept of wisdom is indicated by the development of the third type of wisdom, the “subsequently attained.” Subsequently attained wisdom is established only in fusion with the false discrimination that characterizes beings of samsaric existence; nevertheless, its essence is nondiscriminative wisdom, and it forms the core of great compassion. Moreover, because the wisdom of this stage reflects the complex structure of true reality, it is said to represent a level more fully consummated than fundamental wisdom itself.

When bodhisattvas first attained fundamental wisdom, they realize dharma-body (*dharmakaya*, “reality-body”). Dharma-body is synonymous with suchness, emptiness, and prajnaparamita, and indicates true reality. It is also, however, characterized by three kinds of nonduality: that of the karma-created—the ephemerally things of the world arising from causes and conditions—and the uncreated; of existence and nonexistence; and of the many and the One. These indicate essentially the nonduality of samsara (form, discrimination) and nirvana (emptiness, nondiscrimination). Dharma-body itself, however—realized with attainment of fundamental wisdom—is the uncreated, and the aspect of the karma-created remains to be fully developed from it.

Thus, it is also taught that upon attaining fundamental wisdom, the bodhisattva realizes three Buddha-bodies, which are three dimensions of enlightenment or wisdom: the body of self-nature, the body of enjoyment, and the body of transformation or accommodation. The first is synonymous with formless true reality or the uncreated, but the latter two are said to take on form

in order to manifest dharma and lead beings to awakening. Thus, dharma-body develops the karma-created from within itself as Buddha-bodies that are manifestations of wisdom accommodated to ignorant beings, and this development is the emergence of “subsequently attained wisdom.”

To regard the perceiving self and its objects as simultaneously existent is to perceive by discriminating subject and object. In attaining fundamental wisdom through the practice of not seeing, however, subject and object are both eradicated and the subject-object dichotomy is transcended. Nevertheless, dharma-body or wisdom develops thought and perception again, as its aspect of the karma-created. This new seeing or subjectivity, termed subsequently attained wisdom, is not mere seeing. On the one hand, it arises from causes and conditions and may be said to exist; thus, it corresponds to the existence of self and beings in samsara. As with the thought and perception of unenlightened beings, this seeing may be called discrimination, for it perceives beings and distinguishes things in the world. On the other hand, though thought and perception arise, the discrimination of the self and the world is realized to be false and illusory, for subject and object have already been eradicated through contemplative practices. Hence, objects independent of the self and the self that grasps them are realized to be actually nonexistent and nondifferent in the emptiness that pervades them. This discrimination therefore differs from the false discrimination of unenlightened beings, which does not realize itself as delusional and which sees self and things as real. The subjectivity of subsequently attained wisdom genuinely grasps that the mind is false discrimination and that the objects it perceives do not really exist; that is, it never parts from nondiscrimination or the transcendence of the subject-object dichotomy.

Thus, perception (discrimination) arises out of suchness or dharma-body (nondiscrimination). Both the discriminative perception of things and their sameness are realized simultaneously. Seeing is possible without imposing the delusional split between subject and object because the subjectivity developed from nondiscriminative wisdom sees not an objective world apart from itself, but nothing other than the subjectivity itself. In other words, rather than the dichotomy between subject and object, there is “subjectivity only with no object.” As we have seen, this subjectivity knows things by becoming them, and in this way also comes to know itself as subject.

Bodhisattvas of subsequently attained wisdom see unenlightened beings in samsaric existence, but at the same time, they realize the perceiving self and the beings and objects they perceive to be falsely discriminated and in reality nonexistent. This may be called the interpenetration of the false and the true. The realization that one’s own thought and perception are false is itself true reality established from the stance of subsequently attained wisdom. Further, if unenlightened beings seen by subsequently attained wisdom are taken as samsara, since nondiscriminative wisdom corresponds to nirvana, the relationship between false discrimination and nondiscriminative wisdom is consistent with Nagarjuna’s statement, “The limit of nirvana is the limit of

samsara; between them, there is not the slightest difference” (*Madhyamakakarika*, xxv, 20).

Here false discrimination, samsara, and falsely discriminated things have the structure of being affirmed through being negated, or existing through not existing. Unenlightened beings as perceived by wisdom have nonexistence or nothingness as their fundamental nature. In temporal terms, they are impermanent, standing upon absolute falsity. At the same time, they are not independent existence, but are penetrated by and grounded in nondiscriminative wisdom, or suchness, or timelessness. This is temporal, provisional existence (*J. keu*), or appearance-existence characterized by delusion, or what arises from causes and conditions. The person of subsequently attained wisdom realizes the self as this kind of subjectivity or wisdom. Our ordinary subjectivity is incapable of genuinely seeing itself or perceiving things as they are. When false discrimination does not know its own reality—when it regards what is unreal as real, or temporal as enduring—it is indeed inverted, false discrimination. But when it has come to know itself as false discrimination, it is the fullest realization of nondiscriminative wisdom. The deeper the functioning of this self-realization—the self-awareness of genuine subjectivity—the more clearly emerges the self-identity of contradictory elements in the very basis of existence. Such a fusion of false discrimination and wisdom is the epistemological aspect of the reality expressed “Form is emptiness” or “Samsara is nirvana.”

The Activity of Subsequently Attained Wisdom

As we have seen, subsequently attained wisdom has a double-faceted structure, for it discriminates and therefore differs from fundamental wisdom, but it nevertheless stands in nondiscrimination or suchness (true reality). This complex fusion of contrary elements constitutes genuine nondiscriminative wisdom in its fullest development. Bodhisattvas first eradicate all seeing and discrimination to realize fundamental wisdom, then emerge again into the realm of samsara or forms. Upon emerging, they perceive unenlightened beings and they work to bring such beings to enlightenment.

That false discrimination exists, that subjectivity arises conditionally, that the unenlightened are attached to nonexistent objects as actually existent—these are the very content of subsequently attained wisdom, which functions noninvertedly in the world of false discrimination. Bodhisattvas, through the discrimination of subsequently attained wisdom, perceive ignorant beings undergoing the suffering of samsaric existence because of their attachments to delusive objects. Moreover, because their perception transcends the dichotomy of subject and object, they see unenlightened beings as themselves, and experience the pain of samsara as their own. From this feeling and recognition of oneness arises the desire to lead all beings to awakening.

Here again, the dual aspects of discrimination and nondiscrimination interact. Because the bodhisattvas never part from nondiscrimination, they do not consider the self as real or objects seen as actually existing things and beings. Thus the Pure Land master T’an-luan (476-542) states:

In saving beings, one perceives no object of salvation. The bodhisattva, in observing sentient beings, sees that in the final analysis they are nonexistent. Although he saves countless sentient beings, in reality there is not a single sentient being who realizes nirvana. Manifesting the act of saving sentient beings is thus like play. (Realization, 17)

At the same time, through discrimination they not only perceive unenlightened beings, but become able to express dharma, which transcends words and concepts, and to guide beings to realization of it. Through the discrimination of nondiscrimination, bodhisattvas are able to discern the nature of beings and devise “skillful means” by which to draw them from their ignorance.

In relation to the teaching, it is said that there are “two dimensions of truth”: supreme truth (*paramartha-satya*), which transcends words and concepts, and worldly truth (*samvrti-satya*), the verbal expression of supreme truth. These concepts are often interpreted as two kinds of truth established from different standpoints, but in the thought of Nagarjuna, Asanga, and Vasubandhu, they indicate a single perspective and a single truth. Their differentiation concerns the activity of bodhisattvas who, on realizing fundamental nondiscriminative wisdom, acquire the three Buddha-bodies and, manifesting themselves to lead others to enlightenment, teach their realization through subsequently attained wisdom. The words of the teaching are “worldly” in that they belong to the realm of words and concepts; they are “truth” because they are the verbal expression of true reality. Ordinary words that do not express true reality—whatever sort of truth they may express—are not truth in the sense of the “two truths.”

Worldly truth has two aspects: the words of the teaching that arise from subsequently attained wisdom and express dharma or supreme reality, and the things of samsaric existence that are, through subsequently attained wisdom, conceived discriminatively. The teaching is permeated by true reality that transcends words, for subsequently attained wisdom is inseparable from nondiscriminative fundamental wisdom. This results in logical self-contradiction, both in such expressions as “Form is emptiness” and in the internal structure of such concepts as subjectivity-only. These words, however, can arise only from the second aspect, the field of things and concepts that itself harbors the realization of being temporary and unreal. In subsequently attained wisdom, all karma-created things—all objects of false discrimination—have been dissolved and negated and, at the same time, through being made empty (nonexistent, not objects of false discrimination), have become things as they truly are (grasped nondiscriminatively, from within). In worldly truth, both aspects of words and things, conceived through the discrimination of nondiscrimination, are established on this standpoint of subsequently attained wisdom, and thus are made to manifest what is true and real.

Both the Prajnaparamita sutras and Nagarjuna assert that supreme reality cannot be expressed in words. A Yogacara text, however, states:

Through nondiscriminative subsequent wisdom, the bodhisattva, amidst the forms of all things, being himself noninverted, is able to teach others the causation of all things as he has realized it. (*Mahayanasamgraha*)

In Yogacara thought, perhaps because it was able to articulate the development of awakening into the phase of subsequently attained wisdom, we find confidence in the bodhisattva's ability to teach his realization of dharma.