

# **Until We Reach Buddhahood**

## **Lectures on the Shurangama Sutra**

**Master Sheng Yen**

**Volume One**

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*All thoughts, ideas, and conceptions  
that pass through our minds are dreams,  
and we will not awake to this understanding  
until we reach Buddhahood.*

Master Sheng Yen (1930-2009)

From the chapter “Five Skandhas: False and Unreal”

## **About the Chan Meditation Center**

In 1979, Master Sheng Yen established the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture, more commonly known as the Chan Meditation Center. The mission of CMC is to be a Buddhist meditation and practice center for anyone whose good karma brings them to its front door. (As often is the case, adventitiously.)

CMC has a varied and rich offering of classes in meditation and other forms of Buddhist practice, in particular, its Sunday Morning Open House, which is a very popular event for individuals as well as families. It features meditation sittings, talks on Chan and Buddhist Dharma, and a vegetarian luncheon. All are welcome.

Information about CMC is available at  
<http://chancenter.org>.

## About the Dharma Drum Retreat Center

In 1997, Master Sheng Yen established the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, New York. It is a sister organization to the Chan Meditation Center, and is located about two hours from the Chan Meditation Center by car.

DDRC offers a rich schedule of intensive Chan meditation retreats of varying lengths, from 3-day weekend retreats, to those of longer duration, typically 7 to 10 days. While the retreats are open to all without regard to affiliation, it is preferred that participants have at least some beginner-level meditation experience and/or have attended at least one intensive meditation retreat.

Information about DDRC is at:  
<http://www.dharmadrumretreat.org>

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(To be published in 2017)

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Dharma Drum Mountain



## Preface

In December of 1984, Master Sheng Yen began a series of lectures on the *Shurangama Sutra* at the Chan Meditation Center in Queens, New York, as part of the Sunday Open House program. The Master provided deep, learned, and insightful commentary on key passages from the sutra, placing them in the context of ordinary life for practitioners of Mahayana Buddhism. Oftentimes, he would use anecdotes from his own life experience and contacts with people to elucidate points from the sutra, often drawing laughter from the audience. Not surprisingly, the lectures were very well received by members and visitors to the Chan Meditation Center.

As was the usual custom, the Master's lectures were concurrently translated into English and recorded. Early in 1985, edited transcripts of the lectures began to appear in Chan Newsletter. Thus, to the good fortune of sentient beings, the Master's lectures on the *Shurangama Sutra* became a regular feature of Chan Newsletter.

At the same time that he was abbot of the Chan Meditation Center, Master Sheng Yen was also abbot of the Nung Chan Monastery (later to become Dharma Drum Mountain) in Taiwan. To fulfill his responsibilities to both centers, it was Master Sheng Yen's practice to alternate his time by spending three months in one place, and the next three months in the other. In addition, Master Sheng Yen's renown was such that he traveled to many states in the USA and other countries, to lecture on Chan Buddhism.

Through all this varied and arduous activity, Master Sheng Yen continued to give his Sunday lectures on the *Shurangama Sutra* through at least the summer of 1996, when the Chan Newsletter was about to merge with the quarterly journal, Chan Magazine. The result is that between 1985 and 1996, only 39 of Master Sheng Yen's lectures on the *Shurangama Sutra* were published in Chan Newsletter. We say "only 39" because he did in fact give more than that many lectures on the sutra.

On the side of good luck, the Chan Meditation Center's website, [chancenter.org](http://chancenter.org), at some point began to publish back issues of every Chan Newsletter. Because the *Shurangama Sutra* lectures were well received online, the Chan Meditation Center is publishing a compilation of these lectures as part of the annual Passing of the Lamp ceremony, to honor the memory of Master Sheng Yen.

Beginning with this Volume One, the 39 lectures will be published in two volumes. Volume Two will be published in 2017. We apologize that even the two volumes will not comprise the entirety of Master Sheng Yen's *Shurangama Sutra* lecture series. However, please be assured that the entire *Shurangama Sutra* series of lectures has been digitally preserved, both in New York and Taiwan. For now, in print there exists in Chinese only, an edition comprising the Master's lectures on Avalokiteshvara's method for cultivating samadhi, taken from this same series. It is titled, *The Subtle Wisdom of Avalokiteshvara* (觀音妙智). If our good fortune continues, someday we will also see this book published in English.

Despite this being only a partial record of the Master's *Shurangama Sutra* lectures, an attentive and receptive reader will discover that, as teachings on Chan and Mahayana Buddhism, they are in every sense, complete and fully realized. They give us a profound sense of the context and meaning of the sutra, as well as a detailed view of how one should practice Mahayana Buddhism, and the importance of samadhi within that practice. For this we are deeply grateful to Master Sheng Yen for this offering of wisdom and compassion.

*Note: As his reference text in English, Master Sheng Yen used "The Shurangama Sutra," the translation by Charles Luk (Lu K'uan Yu), with notes by Master Han Shan of the Ming Dynasty. It is available for free digital distribution on the Internet by the Buddhadharma Education Association.*

Ernest Heau  
Compiler

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## Esoteric and Exoteric Buddhism

December 9, 1984

The *Shurangama Sutra* is collected in the Tripitaka in the Tantra section. So it would seem that the sutra belongs to the esoteric sect of Tantra. But we are not Tantra practitioners, nor are we part of an esoteric sect. Why then would I choose to lecture on this sutra?

To answer this question, we must understand the origin of the sutra, why Buddha gave it to us. Buddha was responding to a problem that beset Ananda, his disciple. Ananda was very intelligent, but his practice wasn't particularly deep. It happened one time that he went to beg for alms at a certain household. Ananda was handsome, and the woman of the house fell in love with him. She asked her mother to cast a spell on Ananda, and he fell under her influence. He was on the verge of breaking his precepts as a monk when Buddha decided to intervene. Buddha invoked a mantra, the primary mantra of this sutra. This removed the spell Ananda was under, and his clear mind returned. The girl, too, was affected by this mantra, and she was converted.

It was on this occasion that Buddha taught Ananda how to concentrate his mind. He showed that by developing one-mind, it is possible to cultivate samadhi power. Without this one-mind, it is very difficult to attain samadhi. Thus the sutra begins.

This *Shurangama Sutra* appears in a Tantric collection

because it contains a powerful mantra, but it also speaks of the practice of samadhi and so it rightly belongs to the Chan sect. In China, even after the Tantric sect no longer existed, this sutra was studied and the mantra was often recited. We used to recite it here at the Center, but the mantra is very long and difficult to remember.

The *Shurangama Sutra* speaks of stilling the mind. It includes the reports of twenty-five great practitioners, including Bodhisattvas and Arhats. Each tells of his methods, experiences, and the steps that lead to enlightenment. Thus the sutra is divided into two parts: the first describes the ways to reach samadhi; the second reports the experiences of the great practitioners.

The sutra, says that practice necessitates keeping the precepts, maintaining the method, and continuing in a slow and gradual manner. But when a practitioner begins to make progress, problems arise. The sutra addresses these problems and the demonic states that may arise in the course of practice. If you want to practice in seclusion, bring this sutra. It will help you recognize demonic states, and show you when you are truly making progress.

This sutra is not often discussed. It is very difficult, and there are few who understand it well enough to speak about it. I don't understand the sutra, so it is all right for one who doesn't know to speak to those who also do not know. Even though I may not understand the sutra, I will act as though I do. And you, even though you might not understand, must also pretend and convince yourself that you do. Then I will

not hesitate to speak on the sutra, and you will not lose your enthusiasm to hear it.

Strangely enough, someone who is blind can tell others the right way to go. That is because he has heard the right information. As long as you are not blind, you can follow the instructions and reach your destination. So here we are, I, a blind speaker, and you, blind listeners, yet we will find the way in this sutra.

As I have said, this sutra is used in both Tantra and Chan: that is, esoteric and exoteric Buddhism. I will use this occasion to discuss the relationship between them so that we can see the differences and the similarities in these two paths.

Practitioners of the esoteric sect usually say that those who practice exoteric Buddhism know only theory; they know neither the methods nor the process of practice. The esoteric feel that theirs is the only true way, that they are the only ones who put what they know into practice. For them the exoteric practitioner is like a person whose eyes are open, has speech, but can't walk, has no legs, has nowhere to go. I have met quite a few people who told me that I'm wasting my time teaching Chan, that I only lead my disciples astray. Only by mastering Tantric Buddhism, they say, will I truly be able to help and deliver others.

I once asked a Tantric practitioner why he didn't practice Chan. He said, "Tantric is helpful to me – I practice visualization, and there's something for me to hold on to. And my guru gave me some of his power when I was initiated. I

believe in the power that he gave me.” I asked him how much progress he had made. He was using the method called Red Avalokiteshvara, where you try to visualize the Bodhisattva in red. He replied, “I am now able to see Avalokiteshvara, and he is beginning to give off a red glow. Now when I practice and see the red Bodhisattva I am very happy. If I were to practice Chan, well, there is nothing there.”

Tantric practice emphasizes mantra recitation. A Tantric practitioner believes that a mantra recited over hundreds and thousands of times will bring genuine, powerful results. Prostrating over and over again is yet another Tantric practice. These methods definitely bring results. If they do not, then it means that you have heavy karmic obstructions, and you must recite mantras and perform prostrations for several more thousands of times. Tantric practice, especially in the beginning, offers something to hold on to. After serious practice, there is no doubt that you will get results. If you prostrate hundreds and thousands of times to the Buddha, it will not be his intrinsic powers that bring results, but the power within you. There is indeed genuine validity and truth to the Tantric conception and way of practice.

The power of one’s own mind is illustrated in the story of a poor, old woman who lived during the Ming dynasty. She used a method of practice popular at the time, which was to use soybeans to mark the recitation of Amitabha’s name. Each time the name was recited, a soybean would be put in a container. Usually, when the container was filled, it would be given away as a food offering, but this woman was so poor she could not afford to give away the beans, so she would just



transfer them from one container to another and then back again. After practicing this for some time, it happened that every time she recited the Buddha's name, a soybean would jump from one container to another without her having to use her hands. Was it because the soybeans turned into Amitabha Buddha? No, it was because the woman's concentration had developed to such a point during her recitations that her mind had the power to move things. It was not the Buddha, but the functioning of her own mind that moved the soybeans.

Another story to illustrate this point is that of the first Emperor of the Ming dynasty, Chu Yuan-chang. Before he became Emperor, he was a monk in a monastery, and his job was to sweep the floor everyday. There were many Buddha and Bodhisattva statues, and it was difficult to sweep around them. Chu was constantly scolded by the old monk, because he couldn't really sweep the floor near the statues very well. Therefore the young monk got the idea that it would be very nice if the statues would move when he swept. So everyday he would say, "Bodhisattvas, would you mind stepping aside, would you please step aside." After a few years a strange thing happened: while he was sweeping one day, the young monk saw that the statues moved out of the temple and then returned when he had finished. The old monk was quite surprised. Was it the case that the statues moved for the sake of this young monk? No, it is the same as with the soybeans. A concentrated mind has the power to move things.

There really is nothing extraordinary about these methods, but their power and usefulness cannot be denied, as shown in the examples of the soybeans and the moving statues.



If these methods are used in the proper way, they can be Dharma methods, but in mainland China they were not used as Dharma methods. Thus the Chan sect departed drastically from the Tantric tradition. We say that these practices have a definite validity, but we do not often practice them, and so Chan has nothing of the mystical flavor of the Tantric tradition.

In both traditions it is natural for a practitioner to have unusual physiological and psychological reactions – seeing, hearing, or even dreaming things out of the ordinary. A Tantric practitioner will take what he has seen, heard, or dreamt as signals that the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are recognizing his practice. A Chan practitioner may also have such experiences, but they are not emphasized and are not taken as signals or signs of anything in particular.

In Taiwan, I have a disciple who has been practicing with me for quite sometime. He has a good command of English, so when a certain Tibetan rinpoche was scheduled to lecture, he was asked to translate. He was very nervous. He had never practiced Tantra, and was afraid that he wouldn't understand what the rinpoche said. In a quandary, he finally decided that if he didn't understand, it was the rinpoche's responsibility to make him understand. With this thought he went to sleep. The rinpoche came to him in a dream, placed his hand on the disciple's head, and said, "You don't have to be nervous. You will understand everything I say tomorrow. You don't have to worry." He had a wonderful feeling when the rinpoche touched him. The next morning it was the rinpoche who woke him up. My disciple immediately prostrated to the



rinpoche and thanked him for entering his dream. Curious, the rinpoche asked, “What happened last night?” The disciple told him, and after a few more questions from the rinpoche, he concluded that it might not have been the rinpoche but a yidam, a Dharma protector, who came to him.

Later I asked him if he had ever dreamed of me. He said, “Yes, indeed, many times.” Then I asked if he thought that it was me who had entered his dreams. He said, “No, because Shifu doesn’t have a yidam.” So then I said to him, “O.K., I will go and find myself a yidam so that the next time you dream of me, you will be sure that it is my yidam that is entering your dream.” My disciple objected, “But in Chan there is no such thing as a yidam.”

This idea of a yidam brings us to a basic issue of practice. Yidams are Dharma-protecting deities who exist to protect both the Dharma and the practitioners. Any great practitioner will have a Dharma-protecting deity. Often such a deity will do things that were left undone by the practitioner, and will seek people to help him and solve problems for him. The existence of such deities is well accepted by both esoteric and exoteric Buddhism. But in Chan we should have no attachments. A Chan practitioner, then, should not hold on to such a deity, otherwise he may encounter serious problems in his practice.

Other than the method, there is nothing to rely on in Chan. Even Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have to be dropped; even the method must be dropped once it has produced results. So long as you rely on anything, you cannot be independent,

and genuine progress will be impossible. Anyone who has participated in a retreat will realize this. Chan practice means to let go of all attachments: Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, deities. Only then will you make real progress.

There is a story of Chan master who arrived one morning at a farmhouse that belonged to a monastery. The master saw that everything had been cleaned and prepared for his arrival; even a great meal had been cooked. He was very surprised, and he asked the monk who had made these preparations, “Who told you that I would be coming here this morning?” The monk replied, “Abbot, last night, the deity of the land told me of your arrival.” The master said, “I am ashamed that my practice is so poor that a deity could catch a glimpse of my mind. All the food you have prepared: offer it to the deity.”

An ordinary person would have been happy to get all this attention and have a deity act as his messenger. But for a Chan master this was a disgrace – his practice was so weak that the thoughts in his mind were perceivable to the deity. There should be no thoughts in the mind. When this is achieved, the goal of practice has been reached. There are then no Buddhas and no Bodhisattvas in the mind and nothing for even a deity to see.

In Chan a beginner will use methods to still the mind, and, once a sufficient level of concentration is achieved, he will use a huatou or gong’an. These methods ignore psychological problems and aim only at discovering your own true nature. These are considered “sudden” methods.

Tantric methods are considerably different from Chan methods. Tantra emphasizes phenomena: various experiences and reactions that may arise in practice. If the Tantric practitioner stays at this level and remains attached to these experiences, then he will remain attached to the narrow sense of self, no matter how great the experiences of practice are. But if a practitioner working on visualizing a yidam, for example, reaches the stage where he is fully identified with the yidam, then he has reached the great sense of self. This is not the level of no-self, but there are methods in the Tantric tradition, the Mahamudra method used in the Kagyupa sect, for example, that do lead to no-self.

In Mahamudra the practice is on pure nothingness. In ancient times a practitioner would only be taught this method after he had been practicing for many years. More recently, the rules have become less strict, and it is possible that Mahamudra would be taught at the very beginning. But even using this method it is not easy to get to the stage of nothingness. If the practitioner is lucky, he will be able to use Mahamudra in a very clear state of mind, somewhat similar to that described in Silent Illumination. It is possible to attain this last state of nothingness in the Tantric tradition, but it takes many, many years of practice. It is a gradual approach – first visualizations are used, then Mahamudra. It is a safe method also, because it is gradual. The Chan method, on the other hand, is more sudden, more direct. Once you have attained a certain level of concentration, you aim directly at your self-nature.

Tantric practice is no shortcut to Buddhahood. But there are many good things about the Tantric approach. There is

emphasis on additional practice, such as mantra recitation, and there are many virtuous deeds that must be performed in order to accumulate merit. But you should not believe that these methods will bring sudden enlightenment.

Even in Chan, once you have had an enlightenment experience, you must still practice for a great while. There really are no short cuts in Chan or Tantra – there is no free lunch. We each have to judge our own causes and conditions. We must judge that in this situation esoteric Buddhism is better for me, or at this point exoteric Buddhism is better. In both traditions the ultimate goal is the same.

## Food, Sex, and the Life of Practice

January 6, 1985

The opening section of the *Shurangama Sutra* introduces two subjects that can pose problems in practice: food and sex. These form our substance and bring us into existence. Without food and sex, life would not be possible.

I am often asked, “What is the difference between a householder and someone who has left home – a monk or a nun?” Some people may think that there is not much difference between them, and in a certain sense they are right. But we have this term, “left home.” It does mark a difference in people. Even among householders there are those who practice and those who do not. There is a significance to “practice.” Attitudes towards food and sex are what make the difference.

According to Buddhist classification, food and sex are two of five major groups of desires. The other three are desire for fame, desire for wealth, and desire for sleep. It is quite possible for a person who lacks opportunity or ability to give up the desire for fame. Someone who is barely surviving will most likely be able to give up the desire for wealth – he has so many other problems. Sleep may be important, but someone who is hungry will still dream of food when he’s asleep.

We have two desires left. How shall we choose between them? Let’s take the following situation: You can have a

woman or a man, wife or husband, but the condition is – no food. Most of us would say, “Forget the spouse, just give me some food. At least I’ll be able to survive.” Human instincts are not very different from those of animals. Once you have eaten your fill, the next thing that comes to your mind is sex.

When I was a child in mainland China, there was a family of beggars I often saw in our town – the wife carrying a child in her arms, dragging one by the hand behind her, and the husband carrying a yoke with two containers and a child in each one. The whole family would go from house to house begging for food.

Once I saw a wealthy man scolding them. He shouted, “You’re so poor you can’t even feed yourselves, and still you continue to have one child after the other. Who do you think is going to feed all of these mouths?” The beggar was not impressed; he felt entirely justified in having so many children. “Look at the fish in the sea,” he said, “they have nothing, not even clothes, and yet when the time comes they lay their eggs – hundreds of them. Birds fill their nests when it is their time. And I’m a human being – just like them, I, too, should have a lot of children.”

That’s the nature of sentient beings. Once they feed themselves, they think of sex and procreation. But this is quite natural. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a man in love with a woman, or a woman with a man. It can simply be desire. We may call this a kind of “greed,” but it is useful in maintaining the species. Confucius said, “Food and Sex are human nature. You cannot be harsh in blaming people for



having such desires.”

Now let’s talk about practice. Depending upon what level you have achieved, there are different criteria and rules for dealing with food and sex. There is a different role prescribed for householders, those who have left home, and those who have attained sagehood. There are four levels associated with desires. The first is called “recognizing the desires.” The second is “regulating desires.” The third is “leaving behind desires.” The fourth is “terminating desires.”

To reach the first level you have to know what desire is. You have to recognize that food and sex are desires. On the second level you control your desires – you strive not to be overindulgent. On the third level you begin to leave desires behind. You develop a certain aversion or dispassion towards desires. At the fourth level desires no longer exist. If you think that you can cut off all desires as soon as you start to practice, well, you can’t. It’s quite impossible. It’s not really helpful to set up lofty goals right at the beginning.

People who have never had any experience in practice don’t know what desire is. They only know that they want something. They are not aware of the benefit or harm that following this desire might bring.

When we begin to practice we should try to understand our desires, and we should see how they can be useful and how they may also increase our vexations. With this understanding, we can avoid taking attitudes or actions that might increase our suffering, and consequently we will put

our efforts into directions that will enhance our living and well-being. This is “recognizing, or understanding, desires.”

Food is perhaps less of a problem than sex. A practitioner, however, is not greatly concerned that his food be elegant or delicious, only that it is healthful and nutritious. A non-practitioner might eat simply for enjoyment or indulgence.

Buddhists have a broad perspective of food. We divide food into three categories, sectional, contact, and consciousness. These categories take in both our physical and mental needs. Sectional food is everyday food and drink necessary for the maintenance of our physical bodies. Contact food is both physical and mental. An example of this would be patting a child on the head or kissing him on the cheek. Is this physical or mental? You make contact and the child senses you as a human being. If the child’s body comes into contact with a block of wood, will this make him feel good? Not at all.

Not long ago a doctor questioned me about the celibate life. He said, “You’re a monk. You have no wife, and you can never embrace or be embraced by a woman. This is against human nature.” I said, “Yes, you’re quite right.” “In that case,” the doctor continued, “isn’t that a vexation and a hardship for you – you are denied something that everybody else can have?” I said to him, “Well, you’re certainly right there. Being with a woman is something others can have and I can’t. On the other hand, there are many kinds of suffering that lay people have that I don’t.”

Yesterday a householder came to talk to me. He spent a lot of

time telling me how awful his wife was. He listed her every fault. I asked him, "If your wife is so bad, how come you married her?" "Well, I don't know," he said, "I Just wanted to have a wife." So I said to him, "If you want to have a wife, you have to accept her as she is." He said, "Wait a minute, I came here hoping that you would tell me how to deal with her, not just tell me to accept her and all of the rotten things about her." I said, "Look, you wanted a wife because you thought she could bring you happiness. But you have to realize that she is bound to have faults – these are part of her, too. You can't expect to have the best parts of her character and somehow separate and remove all of her bad parts. If she's so bad how did you manage raising four children with her?" He said raising the children with her was a nightmare, so I asked him, "What's really going on? Why all these complaints?"

This householder finally said, "The problem with her is that she's the jealous type. Well, yes, it just so happens that I have a girlfriend." "O.K.," I said, "the problem is obviously ignorance on your part, because here you are complaining about the suffering and vexation your wife has caused you, and now you're going to another woman. You have just doubled your vexation." He went on, "You don't understand, my wife is no good, and my girlfriend is wonderful." When I asked him what it was that was so terrible about his wife, he told me that the problem was that she spent all of her time with the kids, and had no time left to take care of him. I said, "What will happen if your girlfriend has kids, too; you'll be back in the same boat again?" This worried him, and he told me he didn't know what to do. I said I couldn't decide for

him – he would have to do that for himself. When he was about to leave, he turned and said, “This is all caused by bad luck. I was predestined to a life of suffering. I have no choice but to accept it.” “It’s not bad luck,” I said, “you brought this upon yourself. What’s the matter with you – you’ve got a wife and kids, you go out and find a girlfriend, and then you complain about your suffering?” As he left he said, “O.K., maybe I’ll think about that.”

So you see that whereas I may not have the pleasure of some householders, I certainly don’t have the kind of suffering that they can have, either.

Now, “contact food.” This includes not only just touching, but sexual relationships as well. Indeed, a sexual relationship is necessary for most human beings. Such a relationship is physical and mental; physical, because it provides physical pleasure, mental, because it provides consolation and emotional release. Sex, then, is not just necessary to continue the species, but it contributes to the pleasure and comfort of life. To require everyone to completely abstain from sex is both impossible and wrong – it would cause more harm than good.

The third kind of food is “consciousness food.” All activities associated with the mind are included in this category: entertainment, art, religion, as well as simple thoughts about the past or imaginings of the future.

When you practice I tell you: “Don’t think of the past. Don’t think of the future. Simply hold to your method – and just

practice. This is the best attitude.” I say this about practice, but I don’t recommend it as an ordinary attitude. You have to remember the past and you have to plan for the future, otherwise it would be impossible for you to live your everyday life.

Affirming the past establishes a continuity from which you can proceed. Without this continuity you will have no foundation, and you will not be able to progress from one moment to the next. Planning for the future, hope for tomorrow, and recognizing what will come to be at life’s end are all important for living a full life. Otherwise you may be a pessimist. With no hope for the future you will lack energy and accomplish nothing. Between the affirmation of our past and the hope for the future, we sustain ourselves in the present moment. Only with this attitude can we raise our spirits and make progress. Of course, to sit and do nothing but to mourn or gloat over the past, or dream about the future, is a sign of insanity.

This consciousness food, like section and contact food, is essential for the continuance of ordinary people. They cannot do without it.

Up until now we have been concerned with the first level, recognition of desires. There’s no mystery about the second level, regulating desires. There may be many desires that we can’t avoid, but this doesn’t mean we must completely indulge in them. Even if we try to control ourselves one percent of the time, this is a beginning. Practitioners know they shouldn’t gorge themselves, just eat enough so they

don't go hungry. That's good enough. There are many people who, given enough delicious food, will eat themselves right into oblivion.

I once knew a monk in the mainland who really liked to eat. Others criticized the enormous quantities of food that he ate. He defended himself by saying, "I'm a monk. I don't have a wife. I have no wealth. I don't have anything. At least let me eat, satisfy my appetite, and give a little stimulation to my taste buds. Anyway, all I eat is vegetarian food, so don't criticize me." At New Year's feasts there was a particular food, a sweet-rice dumpling that this monk cherished. One time he ate a prodigious quantity of these dumplings. The other monks cautioned him, "Come on, stop this gluttony, otherwise you'll eat enough dumplings to kill yourself." But he just said, "No problem, even if I die, no problem."

However, after everyone had gone to sleep, a huge mass of undigested dumplings still sat in his stomach, and he couldn't sleep. He recalled that Buddha said that slow walking will help digestion. He got up and did some slow walking. He was still uncomfortable, so what did he do? He took a big wooden fish (a wooden bell in the shape of a fish) and hung it around his neck so that it rested right on his abdomen. He continued to walk with the fish massaging his stomach, hitting it with a stick for extra effect, and reciting the Buddha's name. He would strike the fish and recite, "Amitabha Buddha! Oh, let me vomit what I ate!" Strike again and say, "Amitabha Buddha! At least let me have a little fart!" Again: "Amitabha Buddha! I want to die!" I don't know if any of you have ever eaten as much as he did, but I'm sure all of us have overeaten at one time or another.

Regulating desires in terms of sex? Well, you should not take the attitude that now that you have a wife, you want a second one, or a girlfriend, or a third wife. In ancient China the emperor was entitled to three official queens and 72 concubines. In the Tang dynasty there was an empress who had four or five male consorts, but she was severely criticized for this from that time until the present – perhaps this is something of a double standard. Even nowadays there are similar problems.

I once met a woman who told me she was bent on revenge – her husband was seeing three “women.” She said, “I Just want two men. That’s fair. That’s one less than he has. I want him to know how it feels.” My response was, “Don’t tell me any of this, tell your husband.” Eventually both she and her husband came to see me. I said, “What do you want me to do, set you up with a boyfriend, or you with a girlfriend? Or do you want me to help you separate?” The husband said, “Shifu, you told my wife to ask me if it’s all right to have two men.” I replied, “Yes, I told her to tell you about her plan, but I didn’t tell her to go out and find another man. If you want her to go and find another man, well, that’s your business. If you two want to stay together, you’ll have to work that out between yourselves.”

If you introduce a third person into a family as these people have tried, you really start to have problems. As practitioners, we should at least stay away from such obvious pitfalls. One man or one woman – that should be sufficient.

Regulating desire means more than just staying within a

relationship. The life of a couple should include the pursuit of common ideas and goals. Energy directed in this way cuts down the need for wayward sexual involvement, and, consequently, sexual desire can be further controlled and channeled.

There is nothing easy about attaining the third level, leaving behind desire. Regulating desire is relatively simple. Most rational people can do it. Leaving desire behind, on the other hand, takes enormous willpower and determination. This should not be mistaken for impotency. Someone who is impotent may have little willpower, and, may in fact have strong sexual desire, but he is simply unable to satisfy it. A person who can leave desire behind is able to sublimate his sexual power and turn it into willpower. Such a person is by no means impotent; rather his sexual energy is transformed. In fact, sexual power is life-power. It is the source of stamina and energy. A successful practitioner has strong sexual power – life-power which enables him to accomplish his goals. The Buddha considered the Great, the Powerful, and the Fearless was by no means impotent.

Above leaving behind desire is the fourth level, terminating desire. Someone who leaves desire behind simply chooses not to follow or develop desire. It doesn't mean that such thoughts never appear in his mind. If there are significant changes in his circumstances or environment, he may once again indulge in desire, even after many years of abstinence.

A number of years ago there was a Catholic priest who rose very high in his order, in fact he became a Chinese





bishop. But when he was almost sixty years old, he left the priesthood. Up until this time his life was undoubtedly pure, but when he reached sixty he gave up his vows and decided to marry. This clearly illustrates the difference between the third level, leaving behind desire, and the fourth level, terminating desire.

In order to reach the fourth level a practitioner must attain the level of Arhat, in the Hinayana or Theravada tradition, or the eighth Bodhisattva level. At this point there is no longer any sexual instinct or desire. Thus if a practitioner states that he has terminated his desires, he may not be telling the truth, or he may be fooling himself.

Actually, the determination of when desire exists is quite subtle. If a woman sees a handsome man, and thinks, “He’s very handsome,” or if a man notices a woman and thinks, “She’s very beautiful,” this is sexual desire. A man doesn’t have to think, “I’d like to sleep with her.” No, all that’s necessary is the thought that someone is handsome or beautiful. That thought itself contains desire. According to the Bodhisattva precepts, it is the mind that matters. A little thought can indeed break the precepts. Whether or not you actually act out your desire is irrelevant.

Let’s look at sexual desire from the point of view of the second level, regulating desire. Sexual desire has various levels, but ordinary people make no such distinctions. For them two people either have had intercourse or they haven’t. Likewise for someone who has taken the precept of not having sex, either they have had sex or they haven’t.



For Bodhisattvas, the gradations are much finer. There are five levels. The lowest level is bodily contact – having intercourse. On a somewhat higher level, contact with the hands – shaking or holding hands, for example. Higher still would be engaging in conversation. Above that is looking at each other. And last, hearing someone’s voice, or smelling their fragrance. If your mind is on a very low level, your vexation will be heavy. On a high level, the vexation will be much lighter.

A practitioner who makes up his mind to follow the Bodhisattva path will be considered a Bodhisattva. So it is possible for Bodhisattvas to be at many different levels. When a Bodhisattva gets to the highest level, his sexual desire is really confined to looking at someone, hearing their voice, or smelling their fragrance. Such a Bodhisattva, on a superficial level, would be leading a very pure life. But he would not have reached the level of terminating desires.

Ordinary practitioners and monks and nuns can probably reach the third level. They would not have bodily contact. I mention this because many people have asked me about the proper attitude toward sex for practitioners, monks, and nuns.

As practitioners we should at least be able to recognize desire. The whole aim of practice is to cut down vexations, and ultimately to terminate them. To start in this direction we must begin to control our desires. We should avoid sexual misconduct. We should avoid overindulgence. To reach the higher levels we must try to cultivate samadhi. This will help

us move from regulating desires to leaving desires behind.

In the West there have been cases of young girls who tried to tempt Catholic priests to see whether they do in fact have sexual desires. In the East there are similar cases with monks. There is really no need for such tests, chances are they will succeed. These people often continue to have sexual desire. Monks and nuns should not test the strength of their willpower or their practice. They should recognize that they are still ordinary sentient beings who have not terminated desire. Even leaving desire behind is not so easy to do. We should not try to test ourselves. Rather we should use the precepts to clearly delimit what is right and not right for us to do.

There is a certain sect whose adherents claim that they can reach a level of liberation where it is quite all right for them to have sexual relationships. They say their minds will not move, nor will they be tempted when they have sex. Such claims are doubtful, and they should not be trusted.

## Three Kinds of Beauty

January 13, 1985

Buddha preached the *Shurangama Sutra* because of Ananda's involvement with a beautiful woman named Matangi. She fell in love with him, and Ananda was at first very attracted to her. This attraction illustrates the first kind, or level, of beauty – beauty judged by feelings, emotions, or desire.

Later, Buddha asks Ananda why he chose to follow him. Ananda replies that he became the Buddha's disciple because of his admiration for the 32 excellent characteristics of the Buddha's body and his desire to understand the nature of these extraordinary qualities. Ananda believes that the Buddha's beauty, his purple-gold color, could not have come from ordinary parents. Such beauty could only come from practice in this life and from practice in previous lives. This is very different from the beauty he sees in Matangi. This is a second kind of beauty, which is based on reason and rational judgment.

But the Buddha tells Ananda that his reason for leaving home is wrong. Even Ananda's perception of the 32 excellent characteristics is a delusion. Sentient beings have wandered in samsara, the cycle of birth and death, precisely because of such delusions. Sentient beings are lost in these delusions because they do not know their true mind, their true self-nature, which is pure, unchanging, and eternal.

We must recognize that something that is really true or

genuine has to be beautiful. Something truly beautiful has to be virtuous. Such truth or beauty never changes. If it did change, it would not be truly beautiful, truly virtuous, truly true. Everyone speaks of beauty, virtue, and truth, but are there things that we see, or think we see, really beautiful, virtuous, or true? No.

Most of us only see things through our delusions. What we see, or think that we see, as beautiful, is not truly beautiful. Nor are these things truly virtuous or true. It is only when we are free from our delusions that our self-nature can be described as true, virtuous, and beautiful. This is the third level of beauty, which is also called “wondrous illumination” or “wondrous brightness.” This kind of beauty is judged from the experience of enlightenment, not from desire or reason.

There are many reasons for our inability to see the highest beauty – we are continually beset by problems with our bodies, our feelings, and our emotions. And we have these problems because what we think our life is an illusion. We may think we are real, but we are not real. We may treat something very seriously, take it as real, but again, the thing that we treat as real is not real. Our environment is constantly changing, and this influences us to change as well. We change constantly because the environment changes, and the environment changes because of changing causes and conditions.

We don’t know what will happen to us from one day to the next. This uncertainty makes us want to change what we have for something that may be better. We may find that we

were better off with what we discarded, get it back again, and be dissatisfied all over again. This is a never-ending process, because in a world that is constantly changing, nothing is true. Nothing is truly beautiful.

Ultimately, we may become like a student of mine who keeps moving from America to Taiwan and back again in search of a perfect situation. We are always changing, changing jobs, changing locations, changing girlfriends, boyfriends, changing everything, and never satisfied. The more you change, the poorer the outcome will be. The more you change, the more vexations you will have.

I once saw a cartoon about Elizabeth Taylor. She was standing next to a man, and she was announcing her seventh marriage. The crowd around her paid no attention – she has had so many marriages that another one is no longer news. Her emotional life must be pretty unstable, or why would she keep changing husbands? A life filled with so much change cannot be a happy one.

Often people will fall in love with one another out of pure desire, even though they may call it love. There is no reason in it at all. There is no real interaction with the other as a whole person with special qualities, but just attraction to superficial beauty. If a girl sees a handsome, good-looking man who she's attracted to, she may not stop to consider his character. He may be a beast. Without thinking, she may go right after him. If it is a handsome man with many girls to choose from, she may be left hurt and alone. I know of one case in Taiwan of a housewife who left her husband and

children for a no-good club owner who eventually rejected her. She was left with nothing.

The first kind of beauty, which is what is involved in such situations, is completely unreal, but nonetheless, this is where most of us live. We should try to recognize what is truly beautiful and what is superficially beautiful. This way we can try to lead stable, relatively pure lives. When we reach this point, we still must keep in mind that there is nothing truly, eternally beautiful. Then we won't try to substitute what seems beautiful to us in the next moment for what we have in this one. We should be content with what we have, even though it may not always seem so beautiful. We should not try to constantly change what we have, hoping for something better, because, in the final analysis, these things are all false, unreal.

There is a story of an artist who married, and after a few days painted a picture for his wife. The picture showed a very old couple. He placed the painting near the album of their wedding ceremony. His wife didn't understand what the painting meant, so she asked her husband, "Who are these two people in the painting?" He said, "That's you and me. Now we are young and you look very beautiful. This painting shows what we'll be like 50 years from now." She complained, "I'm still young and good-looking. Why show me like this?" "It's true you're beautiful now, but in 50 years you won't look like you do in your 20's. Even then I will not be disappointed, or disenchanted, because I know now how you will look as the years pass by."



The beauty that we see around us is constantly changing, so it is really a false beauty. But this doesn't mean we should have no regard for the things we think are beautiful. It is because the root of why such things are false lies in us. We ourselves are false. So it's a good combination – us together with someone or something that is falsely beautiful – the false together with the false.

As we live so frequently on the first level of beauty, we have to first recognize that beautiful things are false, and then treat the false things as if they are true. This is just like an actor on a stage who knows very well that he is acting, but nonetheless, wants to put on a good show. He wants to do justice to the script, so he has to act skillfully.

On the second level of beauty, reason, not simply desire is most important. When we think something is beautiful, there are reasons, not just feelings, behind our assessment. And if we ourselves become beautiful, there is a reason behind the transformation.

When we judge things by our reason, we will not be jealous of beauty or success in others. We can recognize that their achievement or talent is greater than ours, and we will not be tempted to criticize or undermine them. If we understand how someone has become beautiful, happy, or successful, we may become like them.

When we do not appreciate beauty, achievement, or happiness by our reason, jealousy may develop, and the consequences can be unfortunate. There is a fable in a sutra of a father and





his two sons. The father enjoyed nothing more than having them massage his legs. The younger would massage the left leg; the elder would work on the right. Eventually each brother became jealous of the other, and thought that the father enjoyed the other's massaging more. Independently, each one got the idea that if he cut off the leg massaged by his rival, he would be the sole benefactor of his father's good will. Consequently, the father was left with no legs. Had each son concentrated simply on doing his part to make his father happy, and appreciated the contribution made by his brother, their father would not be a cripple who would probably disown both of them.

In romantic relationships jealousy may lead a rejected or suspicious partner to do harm to, or even murder, the suspected partner. Such cases are common in Taiwan, and from what I understand, in the United States, too.

Achieving success or attaining beauty depends upon how much effort you put forth. According to Dharma, you can get whatever you want – it depends on your heart and your effort. If you work hard and you don't attain your goal in this lifetime, you can try again in the next lifetime. You must wait until you have exerted the necessary amount of effort and accumulated enough merit.

What we begin with in this life depends on our previous actions. I had a disciple, a monk, in Taiwan who had a weak voice – you could hardly hear him when he chanted, and this caused him great embarrassment. I told him that in a previous life, he must have broken a temple bell or treated the gongs

and bells with disrespect, and so ended up with a poor voice. Similarly, I knew a mother and daughter from Taiwan when I was in Japan. The daughter was quite unattractive, and she complained to her mother about it, who said, “Don’t blame me. This must have happened because you stole flowers from a temple in a previous life. Now you should give donations to a temple, or decorate a temple, and you’ll be much better looking in your next lifetime.”

These examples above, of course, show strong faith and a religious point of view – a belief in reincarnation. But effort is important even in this lifetime. You can bring about positive change if you try hard enough.

There was a young girl in Taiwan I knew who was really quite ugly – she refused to leave her house, until a friend counseled her: “Don’t think of yourself as ugly; it will just make things worse. Accept your appearance, and know that it was the way you were born. Be humble, considerate, and respectful toward others, and don’t worry how you look.” A couple of years later he met her again, and saw that her appearance had changed. You could see that it was the same person, but her features were softer, and she seemed to be more at ease. She had worked from within herself to change her life.

Another woman I met in Tainan, Taiwan is a good example of what effort and right attitude can accomplish. She was twenty-five when I met her, but she had contracted polio when she was three, so that she now had great difficulty in walking, and had developed a kind of a hunchback. However,

she was very capable and determined. When I gave several lectures in Tainan, she took care of all the arrangements. I said to her, “You must have a difficult time doing all of this with your handicap.” But she said, “No, it’s precisely because of my physical problems that people go out of their way to make things easier for me, so sometimes I have to be thankful for my disability.” The woman did not have a trace of self-pity in her, and she was always able to accomplish a great deal. She later married a man who was completely healthy and not disabled at all. It’s easy to see how someone could appreciate this woman.

Now I will concentrate on the third kind of beauty. This is the highest level, and it involves a truth that cannot be perceived by ordinary people in their daily lives. Such people have minds of discrimination and self-centeredness, and what they see, or think they see, is only an illusion. The genuinely true can only be seen after extensive practice and enlightenment experience.

It is easy to be mistaken when trying to recognize the third kind of beauty. For example, we know a human body is neither truly beautiful nor pure, but even a Buddha’s body with the 32 excellent characteristics, which may seem to be wondrously beautiful and pure and undefiled, can also experience death and vanish. Therefore, it is not truly beautiful, it is not truly true. The truly true is that which is neither arising nor perishing.

This idea is also expressed in the *Diamond Sutra* where the Buddha mentioned that some people consider a Buddha to be

one who encompasses the 32 excellent characteristics. The Buddha showed that this is not correct: if the only criteria for being a Buddha were the 32 excellent characteristics, then the so called “diamond-wheel-turning holy king” (a mythological figure), who also has these characteristics, would be a Buddha; but he is not. These 32 characteristics are only a human manifestation. They appear only in this world. They do not constitute the ultimate, Dharma Body of the Buddha.

So what is that which is truly beautiful and truly pure? Today we will not have time to go into that, because the whole *Shurangama Sutra* is about the truly beautiful and the truly pure.

## **Three Levels of the Mind and the Six Sense Organs**

Sunday, January 20, 1985

In the *Shurangama Sutra*, the Buddha continues to question Ananda as to why he chose to follow him. As we have learned in earlier, it was the Buddha's 32 excellent characteristics that first attracted Ananda. The Buddha then leads Ananda to discover that it was the working of his eyes and his mind which aroused admiration in him and caused him to follow the Buddha. The Buddha asks Ananda where his mind and his eyes are. (Here, "the eyes" signify all six sense organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and consciousness). The Buddha tells Ananda that all vexations arise from the coming together of body and mind. And like a king who must know where to find and destroy bandits that invade his country, we must know where to find this interaction between the mind and the sense organs before we can cease the defilement of the mind.

The functioning of the mind and eyes can be discussed on three levels. On the first level, the functioning is based completely on feelings. On the second level, it is based on reason. And on the third level, it is the functioning of an enlightened person. These three levels are comparable to the three levels of beauty discussed last week. But in the last lecture, the emphasis was on the object – seeing beauty in another person or thing, whereas here we are discussing the subject – mind and eyes as they function within the individual.

If we look on the first level, that of feelings, we can see just how subjective an emotion such as love really is. Recently, a woman came to talk to me. She said that she felt as though she had lived her life in vain. She had been married for over ten years, had children, but she had never really experienced romantic love. She felt empty, and she said she wanted to find a true lover. I said, “Ok, but what about your husband?” She said, “Well, he fed me and we brought up children together, but it was not true love,” So I replied, “In my opinion, eating something is real; bringing up children is real; having sex is real; but love is false.” The woman was surprised. She said, “According to the Dharma, everything is false. If you say everything is false, that makes sense to me, but now you are saying that something is real and something is false!” I responded, “I can say that eating or having sex is real. But love is really not love of someone else; it is really love of self. You are taking another person to be the object of your love, but there is no objective reason why you should love this other person.”

Someone just told me of a recent happening in Taiwan. A high-school teacher fell in love with a woman. He went after her without giving up. But the woman did not care about him. The teacher was so desperate that he killed her, cut her body up into chunks, cooked them, and put them into the refrigerator. Now, usually we say that love is in the heart. Since he felt he loved her heart most, he even consumed part of her heart. Eventually he was arrested. When the police asked him why he killed the woman, he replied, “Because I was in love with her.”

When we think that we love someone, we really focus our imagination on to the other person and then proceed to love our imagination. But it is not the other person, him or herself that we love. As you say in America, “Love is in the eyes of the beholder.”

The woman who wanted to take a lover made the comment: “What you say reminds me of something I read in a book on psychology.” It said that when we think that we love someone, our love has less to do with the other person and more with our own needs and dreams. We idealize the other person so that they fit these needs and dreams. So when we court others, we are really courting ourselves. In this sense, it is possible to fall in love with almost anyone as long as you can connect them with your own ideas and dreams. It doesn’t matter even if they bear only the remotest resemblance to these dreams. I said, “Well, I was speaking only from the viewpoint of Buddhadharmā. It just so happens that in this respect someone else agrees.”

I just used love as an example. But the explanation is the same for just about every interaction and every impression we develop about things and people. Persons and objects do exist. But our perceptions of them are subjective. This subjective perception can be either personal or common. The former type is the perception of each different individual. The latter is the perception of a given group or society in general. But a perception may not be true and objective even if the whole of society says that it is. Indeed, it is no more real than a personal perception. Common perceptions exist because of common dreams and needs, and as a result,

common idealizations and labels are associated with certain people, things, places, or events.

We know that customs and habits differ from country to country. Laws change with time. Fashions become outmoded. These indicate that common, subjective judgments also differ from time to time and place to place; they are not absolute. Otherwise, we should find the same laws and customs holding true everywhere.

Then the woman who had visited me said, “According to what you have said, everything is subjective and false, so why bother living?” I replied, “You’re over-reacting. You simply have to understand that men and women build up false, confused, and unfounded perceptions of each other. People get married as a result of this process. If women remained too clear-headed, they would see problems in all men and never get married. And if men did not give the impression of being so nice, they would remain single.” In reality, then, the whole process involves falsity, but people see it as real. And after getting married, the husband will get interested in other women, and the wife, like the woman who came to see me, starts to think of other men and divorce. I told this woman to think about her situation seriously; her marriage is inherently false, but if she gets divorced, she will only manage to find another false one. So I advised her to stay with her false marriage, to live with it in spite of its falsity.

Up to now we have been discussing emotion. The recognition that emotion is false arises as a result of the reasoning



faculty – the ability to think logically; and this ability is characteristic of the second level of the mind. Although we can recognize through reason the falsity of feelings of love, it is quite another thing to become free from the bondage of these emotions. And if before we are free from this bondage, we continue to generate these emotions, we will continue to create problems for ourselves. For example, a couple may be deeply in love before they get married. Each one will think that the other is the ideal companion. But somehow, once they are married, they begin to see faults in each other and regret the blindness that led them to marry. Husband and wife will both think: “If I get the opportunity, I will find someone who is really compatible with me, and I will get out of this awful marriage.” If they do get an opportunity to create another illusion, then two things only will be certain. The first marriage will fail, and the second marriage will prove no less illusory than the first.

Of course, in America it is very common for people to get married many times. With this kind of marital instability, there will be no stability in emotional and family life. You may have happiness for a short while, but it will not last long. This applies also to people who are just dating and have not yet married. Here, also, the function of dreams and false perceptions is just as relevant.

When I returned to Taiwan last summer, I met a Buddhist practitioner who had the greatest respect for me. His attitude was quite similar to that of a girl blindly in love with her Prince Charming. He thought that I was the very best person in the world. Since he owned a car, he told me, “Here is my

car. I'll pay for the gas, and I'll donate my time; wherever you go, let me drive you around. I'll stay with you from now on." But after about three months, he started to complain: "Shifu, you are not really the person I thought you were. How come you've changed?" I said, "It is not I who has changed. It is rather that you are searching for a shadow in your mind, and I am not that shadow. So perhaps you should leave." He left. He woke up from his dream.

If you deal with things in a subjective manner, you cannot help but encounter vexations. In Chinese Temples there are bamboo fortune-telling sticks. You put these sticks into a container and shake them around until one of the sticks falls out. You then read the fortune written on the stick and interpret as you wish. Often people come to this Center, hoping to use these sticks to answer their questions. To such people I usually say, "Although this is a Buddhist Temple, we do not provide fortune-telling sticks. But I can give you some general advice: whatever problems concern you, there is no need to consult deities or Bodhisattvas. You should ask yourself, because no one knows as much about yourself as you do. But when you do this, you should try to look at yourself as if you are another person, so that the problem can be resolved without concern for your own potential profit or loss. With this attitude, you'll have a much better chance of making a good decision than by using the sticks."

Once during a busy period in Taiwan, a woman came to me with an ethical problem concerning her daughter's marriage. She said, "My daughter is going to get married, but the groom's family wants to know the date and time of her birth.

I've been to several astrologers, and they've all told me that the time of my daughter's birth is inauspicious. Now I'm thinking of giving them false information." I replied, "OK, then why have you come to me?" She said, "I'm just asking if it's all right to do this." I said, "No. It's not all right. According to Dharma, you should be truthful; lying is not the way. Why not approach them and say, 'If your son loves my daughter, then by all means let him marry her; if he does not love her, then he should get lost! The astrologers say my daughter is born at an inauspicious time. You can believe this or not as you like.'" If she gave them the wrong information, she would create many problems for herself, and she would always worry that the other family would find out the truth. The woman took my advice and told the parents of her daughter's fiancé exactly what I recommended. They did get married. The fiancé said, "I love your daughter; who cares about the time of her birth?" This is the point: do not let your emotions, your likes and dislikes, cloud your judgment.

We should be able to conduct ourselves in an ethical and reasonable manner in our dealings with others. We need not fear potential problems. But what do we do if problems do occur? Let's go back to the example of the woman who wanted to get divorced. She said to me, "Shifu, according to what you say, no one should ever get divorced; everyone should just accept their fate." This is the proper attitude: if two people really cannot live together, then they should consider their children. If issues relating to the children can be satisfactorily resolved, it is all right to divorce. While Buddhадharma does not recommend or approve of divorce, if two people cannot live together, then they have

no choice but to separate. On the other hand, you should not get divorced just to find true love or to satisfy unresolved desires.

With the exception of a few practitioners, people need an emotional life to survive. But we should use our reason to regulate our emotion. Thus, we get consolation from our emotions, yet we do not let our emotions burn us like a consuming flame. In keeping moderation, we avoid many problems. I recently read a poem about rain. The poem suggested that rain conducts a symphony on the roof; throws a party on top of umbrellas; embroiders the streets with beautiful patterns. Rain gives life to all lives; it is life within life. The poem resulted from the poet's feelings. Ordinary people will think of rain as rain; it will be an inconvenience to them. The poet, however, uses his imagination to enliven the rain. In fact, the working of the poet's imagination is similar to the process of love: the lover imagines the beloved to be ideal. The difference is that the poet uses reason in the expression of his feelings. Thus, poetry is as much a part of one's emotions as love, but poetry is better inasmuch as it uses reason. If we can use reason to harness our emotions, there are many things that we can engage in: reading, music, painting, poetry. Of course, the best of all these is to participate in Chan retreats.

In practice, we use a combination of reason and emotion. We look for samadhi and enlightenment because we have been told that they exist. We imagine them to be very beautiful, exotic states. Our conception of samadhi and enlightenment is steadily enhanced by our imagination. The



role of imagination, then, is quite similar in the desire for enlightenment and in romantic love. During the experience of shallow enlightenment or shallow samadhi, we would be convinced that these states do exist. But the deeper states of samadhi and enlightenment do not exist because the experiencer and experienced are one; since there is no distinction, you cannot say what is experienced and what is not. Since you cannot say that anything is experienced, you cannot say anything exists. In this respect, samadhi or enlightenment and the object of love are quite dissimilar.

Now we come to the third level: the mind and eyes of one who is enlightened. This level is beyond the reach of reason and knowledge. Reason and knowledge can give only an insufficient account of this state of the mind. Recently, someone told me that one of the most famous modern scientists has said that investigation by research and analysis cannot lead to the whole truth; one can at best uncover the tip of the iceberg. Really one needs to use religion to understand the truth of the universe. But many scientists will not accept the existence of anything beyond the realm of the physical. Scientists in fact can be quite blind in this respect. They have very limited understanding and yet they believe that they can solve every problem by means of the scientific approach. On the other hand, there are scientists, especially those who are very accomplished, who gain insights into the limitation of the scientific method. Thus they may intuit that there is a reality behind the realm reachable by the scientific method. What is this reality?

Philosophy is usually considered to be the foundation of



science. And yet behind philosophy is religion. In other words, philosophy relies on reasoning; religion relies on experience, on realization. And of all the religions, the methods taught by Buddhadharma are the surest and the deepest.

What, then, are the mind and eyes of one who is enlightened? The mind and eyes of an enlightened person are different from those of an ordinary person. The mind of enlightenment is not the mind of emotion or reasoning. It is unlimited. It is the reality after liberation. It does not have any appearance or function, but all appearances and functions are not separate from this mind. In the *Avatamsaka (Flower Ornament) Sutra*, it is said that this mind has no limit and it encompasses all the universes as countless as the sands of the Ganges River; and its nature is unmoving. It is important to understand that the mind of vexation, of feelings and thoughts, is never separate from the enlightened mind, but the enlightened mind is nevertheless free from these vexations.

The eye of one who is enlightened signifies the natural response that person will have to understand and help all sentient beings. Another word for it is Prajna, or wisdom. One who is enlightened need not use his corporeal eyes to aid another. But he may use these sense organs, as well as any other faculty or function associated with his body that will help another sentient being. For example, it is said the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara has a thousand eyes and arms. A thousand simply means an unlimited, uncountable number. But these need not be ordinary, physical eyes and arms. Indeed, if any sentient being is helped by a Bodhisattva, then

it can be said that an arm or an eye of the Bodhisattva was present in aid of that being. I should explain that the Chinese word for “assistant” is “helping hand.” Thus we may say that President Reagan’s aides are his helping hands. But these helping hands do not grow on Reagan’s body; however, the authority to act comes from Reagan, so we can identify the helping hands with him.

Very often in my lectures I talk about levels. We should take the highest level as the goal, but our life will start on the first level. We should try to climb to higher levels. We should hope, for instance, at least to reach the second level. In the case of the lecture today, if we stay on the first level we will not be very different from animals. It is only when we reach the second level that we manifest the characteristics of a higher being. By remaining on the first level, we will be like animals, but we will feel greater vexation than animals since we are more intelligent.

## Supernormal Powers

June 9 & June 16, 1985

The emphasis of the *Shurangama Sutra* is on samadhi and the power of samadhi, the concentration of the mind. Through samadhi, the Buddha radiates his power, his teaching. Only through personal realization and experience attained through practice can samadhi be developed. Otherwise, it is impossible to achieve any real power or strength. Simply being associated with a powerful being or receiving the help of a deity is not enough.

Ananda assumed that he would be protected by the Buddha because he was his cousin as well as his constant companion. Yet Ananda succumbed to the magical powers and charms of a courtesan. His samadhi power was not strong enough to resist her.

Today I will talk about samadhi, the levels to which it can be developed, and the supernormal powers that can result from this development. I will discuss supernormal powers at three levels: ordinary sentient beings, deities, and sages.

Ordinary sentient beings may develop their own power from samadhi practice, or they may receive power from other beings as the result of prayer or mantra practice. A very old gentleman I know, Mr. Chen, told me about a Vietnamese monk who practices an esoteric form of Buddhism. He teaches his disciples to use a mantra that enables them to cure headaches and any number of ailments.



If there were a mantra that could really accomplish such miraculous cures, there would be no need for doctors and hospitals. All we would need is the mantra. But even famous lamas in Tibet can fall prey to death and disease. There is no mantra that can defend against every sickness. And without samadhi of your own, the power of a mantra received from a deity, Bodhisattva, or Buddha is limited and unreliable.

Using symbols and especially sounds to invoke the power of a deity is common in India, Tibet, and China. These practices even predate Buddhism. Deities, Bodhisattvas and Buddhas have names associated with them, much as Nagendra and Lucy have names by which they can be called. But names are only conveniences for liberated beings such as Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. They really have no use for names. However, there are mantras associated with these beings which help sentient beings reach them. Manjushri has his own mantra, as does Avalokiteshvara, and so on.

The power of a mantra varies according to the deity it represents. Actually, the name of the Bodhisattva is also his mantra. When we repeat the name of Avalokiteshvara (Kuan Yin, in Chinese), we are reciting his mantra. Recitation of names can generate some power, and this can be useful to someone who has not developed samadhi on his own.

Scientists can transmit messages from one side of the earth to the other by bouncing a signal off an orbiting satellite. Similarly, the power of a Buddha or Bodhisattva can act as a mirror to reflect and also to amplify our weaker power. A Buddha or Bodhisattva does not actually decide to help us –

his help is a natural product of his power, just as a satellite, according to its structure and design, transmits radio or television signals. Enlightened beings do not get annoyed, as some people seem to think, when we repeat their names. Making contact in this way is a very natural process.

Lesser deities know very well when they are being called. It's a little like calling the police when you're in trouble, and they say that they'll be right over.

The power of deities, Bodhisattvas and Buddhas can also be transmitted through spiritual mediums. These are people who are especially receptive to spiritual transmission. The power a medium receives comes directly from a deity, Bodhisattva or Buddha; it is not the medium's own power, no matter what he or she might think.

I am often asked if I have supernatural power, and if I can teach others to develop it. I always say, "I don't have such power, and if I did I wouldn't teach it to you." Using such power would get me into trouble; and if I taught it to you, I would get you into trouble.

Throughout history, people who have used supernormal powers have found themselves in dangerous situations or met tragic ends because of their power. Even one of the Buddha's disciples died for this reason. People who use supernormal power must contend with the law of karma. When you help someone who is sick or in danger, you intercede in the karma that was affecting that person, and the karma now becomes directed towards you. It's like assuming someone else's debt.

Now you have to pay.

Supernatural powers should not be used lightly. The account in the New Testament of Jesus is an example of redirected karma. I believe that Christ had supernormal powers – the ability to heal the sick, make the blind see, and to drive out demons. You might think that with such powers, when he was nailed to the cross, he would have been able to make it disappear with a wave of his hand. But no, he had to die. You could say that Jesus died because of the sins of other people, because he had supernormal power, because he intervened in matters affecting other's lives.

Why then do I even speak about supernormal powers? It is to emphasize the power of samadhi. The practice and experience of samadhi generate mental power. This power does not necessarily have to be supernormal, but it can be. The important point is that samadhi can help increase mental power.

The practice of dhyana and samadhi can clear a scattered mind, and bring it to a state of concentration. The mind can become so concentrated, in fact, that you can keep it on one single thought, whatever thought you choose. You might be able change to the disposition of a particular person or greatly affect a particular situation or event. It depends on how concentrated you are.

A very concentrated practitioner who has eliminated all wandering thoughts can, for the most part, know what he wants to know. He doesn't have to see or hear anything



in particular; he will just know. A person with this facility can foretell the arrival of a visitor, and know the exact day on which he first decided to come. This may seem strange and mystical, but it is nothing more than a power that some practitioners develop from samadhi.

It is important to understand that a practitioner with clairvoyance, such as I described above, will not necessarily know what is on everyone's mind at every moment. Two factors must be involved for a practitioner to know another person's thoughts: there must be a karmic affinity between the practitioner and the other person, and that person must be open to connecting with the practitioner. If you thought that there was someone who could read every thought in your mind, you wouldn't want to have anything to do with him. You would feel naked. But there is really nothing to fear. First, the two factors I just mentioned must be present. And consider that there are eight million people in New York City. No ordinary practitioner can know what they are all thinking. Only a Buddha is capable of that.

These psychic powers can be fallible. Once when I happened to be near a certain mountain in Taiwan, I decided to visit a monk who lived in the area. He had a reputation for knowing when people would visit him long before they arrived. But when I got there, I found that he hadn't known I was coming, and he didn't know who I was. I believe that the reason for this is that I had no intention of visiting him until I found myself in his area.

What you can do depends on the power of your samadhi. If



you have enough power, you can hold a piece of iron or steel in your hand and turn it into gold; then you could take it to a jewelry store and exchange it for cash. All of you in business should learn this technique. Of course, the consequences of trying something like this are that you will probably get yourself killed or end up killing someone else. And if you get life in prison, don't think that you can just melt the bars with your samadhi and escape. By that time your karma will be so strong that samadhi will be of no use.

Supernormal power can be used occasionally, but it should not be used too often. If you do use it, it should benefit others, and hopefully it will bring some benefit to you. Using this power should not place you in jeopardy. If it does, it means that you are transferring someone else's karma onto yourself. Most practitioners refrain from using their supernormal power.

Samadhi power should always be developed before you attempt to use the power of a mantra. When you are firmly established in samadhi, then you can try to help others, occasionally. Use of a mantra without samadhi is not true Buddhism. This is true of Tibetan Buddhism also.

Now I will talk about the psychic powers of the sages – the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. These are beings whose power is such that they can move in and out of samsara unhindered by karma.

For ordinary sentient beings, karma is the law of retribution, of effect determined by prior action. It is karma that causes

us to be born as human beings. Once a doctor I know came to visit me, and asked why we should do good works in this life when it will not benefit us, but the next person in his or her next life. I asked, “If you did something in the morning and received the benefit from it in the evening, would you say the recipient was the same person or that it was two different people?” And again, “Are you the same person who studied so hard to become a doctor, or are you a different person? You can say that it is the same person who has gone through all the difficulties and changes. What you receive accords with how you have acted.”

The sage performs activities just like ordinary people. But unlike ordinary people, the sage no longer has a sense of self. As a result, there is no karmic consequence. Karma follows ordinary people like a shadow. No karma follows the sage. When a sage performs a good deed, it generates nothing – there are no consequences. It doesn’t seem like it would be that interesting to be a sage, does it? An ordinary person gets something back for his efforts; a sage gets nothing.

Once when I was in Taiwan a young man came up to me, and told me that he wanted to model his life after mine. “But unfortunately,” he said, “I have a strong karmic affinity with a young woman, and I have to work through it.” I asked him, “Don’t you think you’re making the bond stronger by putting all of your time into this relationship?” He said, “No, I figure that I am getting this particular obstruction out of the way.” This is the nature of ordinary people – there is no way they can keep themselves away from karmic action and reaction.

But for sages, avoiding karma is a natural process. Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism differ in their classification of enlightened beings. There are four levels in Theravada, ten or sometimes eleven in Mahayana. Someone who is at the first level, the “stream-enterer” according to the Theravada classification, can truly hold to the precept of not killing. We might take this precept, but it is more than likely that we will inadvertently step on an insect or somehow crush a bug during the course of the day. But the psychic power of a stream-enterer is such that when he walks, creatures move out of his way.

The last level in Theravada before Buddhahood is that of Arhat. You may have read that someone can attain this level without acquiring psychic powers. But Arhats can accomplish almost anything they wish to do. However, they may be unaware of their power. There is a story of a group of monks who arrived late one night at a vihara, an Indian temple. Their lamp had run out of oil and the night was pitch-dark. One of the monks said, “We can have light if there is an Arhat here.” Sure enough, a monk stepped forward and said that he was an Arhat. The first monk suggested that he point his finger and illuminate the area. The Arhat did just that and the area was bathed in light. He was simply unaware of some of the powers he had attained.

In the literature of many cultures there are references to heavenly beings who answer the prayers of mortals with silver gold, or precious jewels that have been transformed from ordinary objects or substances. Buddhist sutras acknowledge this power, but caution that a transformed

substance can revert to its original form. It may take eight, eighty, even five hundred years, but it will eventually change back. However, if an Arhat transforms something into gold, it will remain for a great kalpa.

Many people are curious about past and future lives. Devas and gods can know the past and future, but their power is limited to perhaps ten lives in either direction. The most powerful deva may be able to see one hundred lives in either direction, but no further. Arhats have even greater power. They can remember lives for ten thousand kalpas, but not even they can go back to their origins. They can, however, tell exactly what will happen in the future.

Now I will compare the power of an Arhat with that of a Buddha. Of all Arhats, the strongest in psychic power was Maudgalyayana. Once, the Buddha said to him, “There is a world that lies to the west. If we go there together, you will not be able to keep up with me, so you start the journey before me.” It took Maudgalyayana three months to reach his destination. When he arrived, the Buddha was already there. Maudgalyana asked him when he had departed. The Buddha replied that he had just left a moment ago. For the Buddha there is no distance. This world or that world is close by, no matter how far it may seem to us. There is no time for the Buddha – he sees limitless lives in the past, limitless lives in the future, all seen in the same instant.

A god can have jurisdiction over a particular region, or country. A deva who had power over this planet would be powerful indeed. But this is a small planet among myriads.



An Arhat's power extends over thousands of world systems. He has the ability to know what transpires anywhere in his domain.

But the Buddha is everywhere at every time. Bodhisattva Manjushri is very close to Buddhahood, so his power is comparable. He, too, is everywhere at all times. Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara can respond effortlessly to a thousand different beings at a thousand different places at the same time.

There was a Chan master who decided to urinate in front of a statue of the Buddha. Another monk rushed over and asked him what he was doing. The master said, "If you can show me where there is no Buddha, I'll go there."

The power of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas exists at all places and at all times, and far surpasses the power of other beings: Arhats, deities, and common people.

## Light and Quakes

June 23, 1985

When Buddha expounded the Dharma, he emitted a strong light that radiated through the universe, and he generated six kinds of quakes that shook through all the Buddha worlds.

Light is that which can be seen; it represents the hopefulness the Dharma can bring. Quakes can be felt; their motion and vibration represent the energy of the Dharma. These two phenomena are sufficient for the Buddha to express his teaching. The Dharma can really be expressed without any words or language at all. It is in fact, inconceivable; it cannot be truly discussed or approached by reason. There are many sentient beings who see this light or feel the motion, and yet don't understand their significance. Therefore, it is still necessary for the Buddha to use words.

There are many levels of light. Most elementary is the light that all ordinary beings can see. The elementary level of motion is the kind ordinary beings can feel. There exist, however, higher levels of light and motion that ordinary beings will not be able to see or hear. Our eyes are normally receptive only to visible light – a small spectrum. We notice only gross movement – subtle forms of motion elude us.

Depending upon the situation or the occasion, sentient beings may be able to see the light the Buddha emits. The kind of light sent forth may vary from one discourse to another. And each Dharma audience will elicit light that accords with the



particular needs of the listeners. But only sentient beings with the proper causes and conditions can see the light the Buddha sends out, and only they can listen to the Dharma.

Sentient beings exist on different levels, and they, too, are able to see different qualities of light according to their attainment. Bodhisattvas can see the same light ordinary sentient beings can see, but light meant for Bodhisattvas will be invisible to sentient beings. The light the Buddhas transmit among themselves is invisible to Bodhisattvas.

Light and quakes may also serve as signals – in much the same way that the clapping of boards announces lunch, the sound of the bell, a lecture. When the Buddha generates light and quakes, it may mean that he is about to expound the Dharma to Bodhisattvas of a higher level – the first bhumi and above – then no words will be necessary. The light and quakes will be sufficient for the Bodhisattvas to understand the Dharma.

Light can also represent the Buddha's wisdom; quakes can represent merit and virtue. Light guides and helps sentient beings. Quakes and motion are the actions of the Buddha helping sentient beings. The Buddha has the totality of all wisdom. He may only use a part of his wisdom, depending on the sentient being in need. When he speaks to sentient beings, he will use sentient-being Dharma to help them. If he speaks to high level Bodhisattvas, then Buddha will use Bodhisattva Dharma or even Buddha Dharma. The light of the Buddha's wisdom can be a small light or a grand, intense light. The light described in the *Shurangama Sutra* is the



greatest kind; the Dharma expounded is the most important.

Some people raise this question: According to the sutras, Shakyamuni lived 2,500 years ago. Quakes occurred and light radiated not just in India, but throughout a myriad of worlds. Why weren't these lights and quakes recorded in history? Only those sentient beings with causes and conditions can see the light and sense the quakes. Otherwise these phenomena are inaudible and invisible.

There is yet another function of light and quakes. Light can be the power and ability of anyone to help others. To the extent that we have this power, people will see us as hope in itself. In that sense we can give off light. Quakes symbolize the power to move others; when we do something very good, others will be touched by what we do and when we do something bad, others can be shocked by what we've done. Either way, actions we take affect others.

Before Mao Tse-tung died it was said that one word from his lips could move the world. Or if someone were to try to shoot President Reagan, one or two bullets could bring incalculable political consequences. Good actions, too, can have global significance. Someone able to avert a war would affect the whole world.

Do you think you are capable of emitting light and moving others? We can all do this. No doubt when I speak I am emitting some light – you in the audience also emit light.

When my book, “Getting the Buddha Mind” came out in

1982, many people liked it and found it helpful. But it wasn't only my doing that caused it to happen; many people were involved in its production. The moving and touching of others was brought about by many people. We all have light.

I have just spoken of a kind of metaphoric light. But there are people who, as a result of great practice, wisdom, merit and virtue really have light. You can actually see it. It's not symbolic. It is real physical light.

Over thirty years ago, I was in the army. One day a general came to visit. He was dressed like an ordinary soldier, but I could sense he was someone special. On another occasion I met Chiang Kai-shek. Before I met him, I always imagined that he would be tall and striking. But when I saw him, even though he looked quite ordinary, there was something about him that made me not want to look into his eyes. He gave out a sense of being larger than he really was.

If you have great faith and achievement in practice, you can see the light of a practitioner; otherwise you must have close karmic affinity with him to be able to see it.

In Taiwan there was a woman who had a special power of seeing. Once I was giving a lecture, and as I spoke, she saw a light emanating from me, and she noticed that my translator absorbed the light. The more the light was absorbed the more the translation improved. The woman also saw a third figure standing behind us who seemed to merge with the translator. When told about this, my translator replied, "When I began, I concentrated very hard on what you said because I was

nervous and didn't want to make a mistake. Later I felt I didn't have to be nervous. I just asked Avalokiteshvara to help me."

Who was the third person standing behind the translator? It may not have been an incarnation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, but it was an extension of his power.

I was unaware of the light myself, so I asked the woman what it looked like. She said that when I first started to talk about the Dharma, a glow came from my head; then as I continued to speak, the light seemed to come from my whole body, spreading in all directions. This is because when I first started to speak, I had no idea what I would talk about. Thus the light came from my head as I thought about what I would say. Later I spoke spontaneously, and the Dharma light emanated from all parts of my body. That is why statues of Buddha are sculpted to show symbolic light radiating out from all sides.

Someone within the range of light will not be able to see the light. He must be outside the range to see it. If you can't see the light, either you don't have karmic affinity with the practitioner or you're already inside the range of the light. This is like hearing about a person's greatness. At a distance he or she may appear great, but the closer you get, the more the semblance of greatness diminishes.

Perceiving a practitioner's greatness is a different story. Whether near or far, the greatness will be apparent to someone who has karmic affinity with him. But strangely



enough, with a very great practitioner, even though you may have a karmic affinity with him, if you are not a practitioner, you will sense his greatness when far away, but when close, you will lose the sense of greatness.

There s a Chan story: a certain practitioner visits a Chan Patriarch and arrives when it is already dark. After a short visit, the Master said, “Isn’t it time that you went home?” The practitioner said, “It is dark. I dare not take the road home”

The Master said, “It’s all right, I can get you a lantern,” The practitioner took the lantern and started walking home, but the Master soon called him back to the temple. The Master took back the lantern and blew out the light. It was dark in the Master’s room and it was dark outside – at that moment the practitioner got enlightened. He had been afraid of the dark, but now he could find his way home.

Did he get the light?

This is the light of wisdom. Without wisdom, even in broad daylight, you walk in darkness. When the Master blew out the lantern the practitioner got enlightened. He no longer saw the outside as dark and the inside, which was illumined by the lantern, as light. He saw that there is no difference between outside and inside. The light of wisdom was derived from darkness. The practitioner no longer feared darkness. He was then able to radiate light and move others.

Practitioners must attain a certain level before they can



use the light of wisdom and the power of merit and virtue. Before this level is attained, the light of wisdom is dormant; a practitioner can only use the power of virtuous karma. There is still light given off, but it is not the light of wisdom. After enlightenment, the true light of wisdom arises; it's something like an electric generator that has been kept unused in a storeroom. It has been still and silent for a great while, but suddenly it is turned on, and it begins to generate a continuous flow of electricity. People, too, start to generate light as they approach Buddhahood. Their light becomes stronger and stronger.

You can generate light to help sentient beings. It will shine even when there is no one there to benefit from it. When you are truly ready, others will sense your light. If you help them, if you move them to practice, then you will give forth light and cause the quakes of the Dharma.



## Two Perspectives of the Mind

July 21, 1985

In an earlier lecture, I spoke about Buddha's explanation to Ananda in the *Shurangama Sutra* of the two perspectives, or views, of the mind. There is only one mind, but there are two basically different ways to look at it.

The first perspective is that of the mind of ordinary sentient beings. This is the mind of attachment, the mind which keeps us moving between birth and death, the mind which creates all dharmas, all phenomena. This phenomena-creating mind is the mind of arising, because that which is created necessarily contains discriminations, differences – particulars that are not in unity.

The alternative perspective is that of the mind of the Buddha. According to this view, there really is no mind. This is the state of non-arising which is our true self-nature. And to realize this self-nature is to realize the dharma of non-arising. When this is achieved, the bondage of samsara is broken, and vexations are ended. Not one single dharma (in the sense of “phenomenon”) can arise out of this “uncreate” stage. In this stage, there are no true and no false dharmas; there is no dharma at all.

For the remainder of the lecture I will be speaking, for the most part, about the first perspective, the mind of arising, and the ways by which we may affect this arising.



When we say “all phenomena are created by the mind,” we must understand that something in the mind is manifested and then brought into the world. Generally, we begin with a desire for something. For example, a couple I know had no children for the first three or four years of marriage. The husband’s father visited them one day, and said, “You may not want children, but I’m looking forward to being a grandfather.” The couple decided to have a baby, and after some time, the wife gave birth to a girl. When the girl was two, the parents thought that they would like to give her a baby brother. But the next child turned out to be another girl. The desire for a child started the process that led to birth of one girl and then another, but the couple wanted a boy. So you see, you may get what you want, but you may not get it in the way you want it.

The idea behind “created by the mind” is often misunderstood: When I was in Japan, a friend of mine married. His first child was a girl. He had a second, and then a third child – all girls. He approached me and said, “Master, I no longer believe in Buddhadharma! The sutras say all phenomena are created by the mind. O.K., I’ve had a boy in mind, for some time now, and all I’ve gotten were girls!” I said to him, “You’ve misinterpreted the teachings. It certainly doesn’t mean that all you have to do is to wish for something and it will suddenly appear out of thin air. If that were the case you wouldn’t have to work. You’d never have to lift a finger. You would simply say, ‘I want a beautiful wife,’ and presto, she would appear. A beautiful house? A fortune in gold? It would all be yours just for the asking.” For one thing, good fortune on demand like this would be quite contrary to the laws of



karma. The sutras do teach that all phenomena – all dharmas – are creations of the mind, but this teaching is not meant to be taken in such a superficial, literal way.

“All phenomena are creations of the mind,” means this: Sentient beings are filled with desires and intentions to do all manner of things. The actions that result from these intentions have consequences. These consequences are what create all phenomena.

To really create something of significance takes more than just wishing. Here is an example: Chan Master Hsu-yun (Empty Cloud) (1840-1959) traveled widely during his lifetime, and wherever he went, he undertook the building of a monastery or temple, or he would oversee the repair or renovation of an existing temple. People who saw his accomplishments would often ask, “How is it so easy for you to build one monastery after another?” The master replied, “It is because I have monasteries in my mind.” Others would say to him, “We too have monasteries in our minds.” But Empty Cloud said, “No, I have monasteries in my mind, you people do not. This is because I have been building monasteries in my head, stone by stone, for a great while. These monasteries are already solidly built. Now, when I want to build a temple or a monastery, the task is easy because they have already been built in my mind. What you call monasteries in your minds are not really monasteries. You haven’t even taken the first step towards building a monastery.”

Then someone said to the Master, “A monk should be like a floating cloud or running water. There should be no



attachment to worldly things. Why then do you keep on building monastery after monastery? And what's more, in the past monasteries have come to ruin or been destroyed by malevolent people. This will happen to the monasteries that you build – you are providing the opportunity for people to do evil and amass bad karma. Why do you bother doing all this?"

Empty Cloud said, "When people let monasteries go to ruin or destroy them purposefully, this is the force of karma. At those times, when sentient beings have little merit, virtue, or good karma, then monasteries will fall into ruin or be destroyed. On the other hand, when their merit, virtue, and karma are better, there will be a need for monasteries, and they will be built. Certainly, at some future time they will go to ruin. But I don't concern myself with things to come. If there are two or three good people who will live in a monastery, that merits its existence. If someone comes tomorrow and tears it down? I don't concern myself with that, nor do I concern myself with what happened in the past. I do what has to be done now."

"And according to Buddhadharma, all things result from actions formulated in the minds of sentient beings. These things are comparable to flowers in the sky or the moon shining in water. They are illusions. Flowers don't grow in the sky; the moon is not submerged in a lake. Such actions spring from the minds of sentient beings. Nevertheless, these Dharma activities are what I want to do in every moment. Monasteries, temples, places to practice in– they are all comparable to reflections of the moon in the water. Still I



build these things wherever I go, at every chance. I know that they may pass away like the reflection of the moon. Maybe I do these things because I am just an old fool.”

When we say that all phenomena are creations of the mind, we are not talking about a wandering mind. That is, idly daydreaming and doing nothing will never enable you to create or build anything. But if your mind really moves in a particular direction, it will have the tendency to produce action according to the original idea or a thought. What you do or accomplish amounts to a creation of your mind. And again, if you have a particular feeling towards somebody or something, you will immediately form a relationship with that person or that thing. In that sense, such people and things are creations of your mind. People whom you have never met, or whom you have never heard of, have no existence for you. According to the nature of causes and conditions, we all have had a relationship to the Buddha. All sentient beings are in the mind of the Buddha.

The number of people that you can think of, with whom you can have relationships, depends on your level of attainment, your wisdom and ability. Someone with little wisdom or ability cannot have a relationship with a great number of people or things. A great religious teacher is concerned with all beings in the world. Parents are concerned with the welfare of their children. The president of a country is concerned with the citizens of that country. What the mind encompasses is determined by the nature of the individual, his stature, vision, and goals.



The strength of a relationship depends on the presence the other person has in your mind. A long-time female disciple of mine finally got married. Still she assured me that I was number one; her husband was number two. When she and her husband came to see me, even he said this was true. But I said, “It’s not true. You have the number one position. Your wife sees me only two or three times a year. The rest of the time she stays home and takes care of you.” The husband said, “When she’s home, my wife scolds me constantly. She would never make such remarks to you.” Once again I said, “This is only because she lives with you and sees me so infrequently. If she saw me more frequently, who knows how she might act.”

Only things to which we have a deep attachment or things we seriously would like to do really exist within our minds. I’m sure that this woman disciple considers me important, but her husband is also important. These are two very different relationships. What she expects from me and what she expects from her husband are two very different things. Only when we are close to someone or something, do we really take him, her, or it seriously. These people or things live in our minds. We read that the world contains over four billion people. We have only met a tiny percentage of these people, and the number of them that we have had any real relationship with, that live in our minds, is very small. Does this mean that these four billion don’t exist for us? Not exactly. That we were born on the earth in the same era means that in the past, we have had some karmic relationship with each other.

In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, it says that the mind is like a master artist who can paint whatever is perceived in the five



skandhas. What is now in the mind can be manifested in the world. And what now exists in the mind will probably be manifested in the future. An analogy I often use is to compare the mind to a great water tank filled with grains of sand which are continually rising and sinking. Every time the mind moves, it is like adding a color to a grain of sand. A strong feeling or reaction will add a deep hue to the sand that will not wash away for a long time. Milder reactions add lighter colors that fade quickly. A grain that sinks to the bottom will eventually rise to the top and you will see it again. Good karma and bad karma come and go in this way – always the results of our own thoughts and actions, now appearing now disappearing, sometimes good fortune, sometimes misfortune. We often speak about promoting the welfare of the poor or doing something for our own good. Rarely do we speak of promoting disaster for ourselves. But it is a fact: all disasters are created by us for ourselves.

If there is something strong in the mind, some thing with a deep color, it is hard to prevent it from resurfacing. The builders of a waste treatment plant in Kao Hsiung, Taiwan found that the plant created more waste than it cleaned. They had good intentions, but the nature of the problem and the factory itself undid the original purpose. Another example would be the side effects that a drug might produce – sometimes worse than the disease it is meant to cure. In our daily lives we may not think of creating disaster for ourselves, but somehow we end up creating bad karma. We don't really wish to cause harm to other people, but we often harm them despite ourselves.

Wars have occurred throughout history for a variety of reasons – ideological, political, and economic. Often leaders wage wars for what they consider good reasons, but nonetheless, they cause great suffering. Marx may not have been evil, in fact he was motivated by a desire to help people, but his teachings have caused great suffering. We have seen how all things are created by the mind, and how good and evil karma may result from these creations. We cannot prevent these things from occurring, cannot stop the creations of the mind, until we reach the second stage of the mind – the non-arising, the uncreate.

If you wish to do something – make a vow as we say in Buddhism – do you seriously start building the object of your desire or intention in your mind? When you do, your mind is truly creating something. If you are really putting all your effort in this direction, then that is the truth of “all phenomena are created by the mind.” So to my friend who had three daughters, I might have said, “I know of” another family with three sons – they balance out the girls in your family.” Or if you look at the situation in another way, if we can strive and attain Buddhahood, then what is the difficulty in having a son?

Here is a story of a childless couple who strove through great difficulty to have a son. They were in their late forties and had been trying to have a child for years. They went from temple to temple, praying to various deities. Nothing happened, until one day they met an old monk who said to them, “Find an old monk in poor health, take care of him, and eventually you’ll have your son.” The couple located



an old monk in a nearby temple who was seriously ill, and they took him home and nursed him back to health. But he was very old, and after only two years he was on his death bed. He said, “You have been so kind to me, how can I repay you”? The couple said, “You don’t really owe us anything – we did this for you because we wanted a son.” The old monk said, “Fine, I’ll come back to you as a son.” After some time the wife gave birth to a son. He was a wonderful boy, and he was devoted to the couple. But when he was in his teens, the first monk who originally gave the couple advice, met the young boy and said, “You know, you’re really an old friend of mine.” The boy suddenly realized who he was, and said, “Well here I am. I had no choice – the old couple, they were so nice to me.”

There probably was a better way for the monk to help this couple than to come back as their son. But the point is that if we seriously want something enough, we should not only build it in our minds, but we should also strive to help others at the same time. Eventually we will achieve what we want. Yes, you can get what you pray for, but you must also perform good works if you really want to have your wishes fulfilled.

## Upside Down

December 8, 1986

Ananda was puzzled by why we have lost sight of our true nature. The Buddha replied that ordinary sentient beings do not see clearly because of their preconceived views. What they think is right side up, may be upside down; what they believe is correct, may be incorrect. The Buddha placed his hand down, and asked Ananda whether his hand was right side up or upside down. Ananda replied that it would be commonly held that the hand was in an inverted position, but he did not know whether the position was correct or inverted. The Buddha explained that since we were born with our hands hanging down at our sides, perhaps the hand pointed up is really in an inverted position. Ananda knew what the view of a common man might be, but he also knew that this was not the Buddha's view. The Buddha used this analogy to show that the average person has a mind that creates discriminations, and that what he believes to be true, may in fact be false.

When the Buddha saw Ananda's confusion, he spoke:

*"Virtuous men, I have always declared that Form and Mind, and all causes arising therefrom, all mental conditions and all causal phenomena are but manifestations of the mind. Your bodies and minds are just appearances within the wonderful, bright and pure Profound Mind. Why do you stray from the precious, bright, and subtle nature of fundamentally Enlightened Mind, and so recognize delusion within*

*enlightenment? The mind's dimness creates dull emptiness, and both in the darkness unite with it to become form. The mingling of form with false thinking causes the latter to take the shape of a body stirred by accumulated causes within and drawn to externals without. Such inner disturbance is mistaken for the nature of mind, hence the false view of a mind dwelling in a physical body, and the failure to realize that this body as well as external mountains, rivers and space, and the great earth are but phenomena within the wondrous, bright True Mind. Like an ignorant man who overlooks on the great ocean, but grasps at a floating bubble, and regards it as the whole body of water in its immense expanse, you are doubly deluded amongst the deluded."*

The Buddha spoke about delusion, the inverted point of view commonly held by sentient beings. Sentient beings usually take external phenomena as reality, but because such things are not real, they can be compared to a cloud that moves across the sun and temporarily obscures the brightness: the one pure mind of wisdom. The body, the mind, the environment are all part of this wonderful, bright True Mind. All things are not apart from this mind.

If we maintain a balanced mind toward all of these phenomena, we become like the Buddha. Ordinary sentient beings see a bubble on the ocean and take it to be real and substantial; they forget the ocean from which it came. Most people take what they hear and know and what they possess to be part of themselves. What they have no contact with they disregard. The small part of the world they see blocks them from wisdom, like a cloud hides the sun. People are

cut off from liberation and bound up with the little bit of phenomena that they know. This is being upside down. This is being inverted. This is seeing the part and missing the whole. There are people who visit a mountain, bring home a rock from its face, and never see the mountain's immensity.

We divide invertedness, or incorrect behavior into three levels: worldly inversion, inversion of Buddhadharma, inversion of enlightenment.

Worldly inversion is common and easy to understand. It is behavior that we might call abnormal, or asocial. An example would be a father who marries his own daughter, or someone who prefers the company of animals to that of human beings, or someone who does hateful things to get the attention of someone he or she loves. These things do happen – a father who marries his daughter, for example – such cases appear in the Bible or in Chinese history. Wang Chou-chin was a woman who was captured by a tribe of barbarians. The head of the tribe took her as his wife. They had a son, and when the father died, by tradition, the son had to take his father's wife, his mother. We view such actions as inverted.

There are many cases of people who prefer animals to people. Once in Massachusetts, I met a woman who loved her dog more than people. When she died she left everything she had to her dog. This is inverted behavior.

It is not surprising for a man to see a beautiful woman with another man, and think, "What does she see in him? He must have something on her; otherwise she wouldn't possibly

have anything to do with him.” There are people who would do anything to win someone else’s attention or affection. John Hinkley was a young man who tried to kill President Reagan just to impress an actress. This is inverted behavior.

The second kind of inversion concerns Buddhadharma. Buddhadharma speaks of the connection between past, present, and future through the laws of cause and effect. If something happens to most people, they blame it on fate or God.

Recently a man came to me and told me a sad story. He had only one son, and the young man had developed cancer. Why his son, and not another’s, he asked. “I’ve been a good person, and so has my son,” he said. “Why is he being punished?” He later went to a Protestant minister, and the minister told him that the question itself was wrong. God has the authority to give a son, and He has the authority to take one. But no one can blame God. The only recourse is to pray to God to make the boy well. “Is God unfair?” he asked. Then he said to me, “Shifu, if I become a Buddhist, will my son recover? If this were true, I would convert immediately.”

Recently, an old, venerable monk developed cancer and died. A few years ago, Karmapa, an accomplished monk who was the head of a Tibetan sect of Buddhism, developed stomach cancer and died. Even great masters, accomplished practitioners, can succumb to ordinary illnesses. What is at work here? Everyone has bad karma, and is subject to the suffering that comes with karmic consequences.

A young girl with breast cancer came to me to see if I could

save her. I said that I could help her prepare for death, and help her lose her fear of it. I also counseled her to do as many good deeds as she possibly could. She turned and walked out without saying a word. The next day her older sister came to express her anger: “Shifu, I sent my sister to you for comfort. Why did you talk to her about death?” I said, “Even I am going to die, so why shouldn’t I help other people, who are also going to die, to prepare for death?” But the older sister could not understand.

It is hard to say what will happen with sickness: a woman I knew developed cancer of the uterus. She was given three years to live. She wholeheartedly embraced Buddhism, and she did whatever she could to help others. She is still living today.

I told all of these stories to the father who came to see me about his only son. I wanted him to understand what was happening so that he would be able to comfort the boy. Anything that happens to us has its root cause in the past or in a previous life.

Once when I was a young monk I went to visit my master’s master. He was a great practitioner, and many lay people brought him money and gifts. He would always share whatever he got with the other monks in the monastery. When I was presented with a gift, I said to him, “You certainly must have accumulated a great deal of good merit, and I am fortunate to share in it.” The old monk scolded me, and told me that my view was inverted. He said, “At some time I will have to return all of these things, and with interest.” I asked,

“If you don’t have any merit, how can you get all of these gifts?” The old master said, “You may think that I’m getting all of these gifts, but I’m really an intermediary – I must pass them on.” I understood his meaning then: Many who gave gifts to the monks were really hoping to get something in return. If you give something in the hope that you are planting good seeds to sow later, then you will never be free from samsara. You will continue to spin through life after life.

If you continually set up causes, you will receive effects. If you think about it, you will see that you may be owed so much that you cannot receive everything in one lifetime. You’ll have to keep coming back. Like rolling a snowball downhill, the effects to be received grow greater and greater. I was happy that this great master scolded me. I took to heart the principle that everything I received was a cause; everything given out an effect. That is, what you receive must be passed on, you cannot really hold on to it; what you pass on, you pass on as a way of responding to something you have received. If you act in this way, what you receive will not create an effect that you will one day have to receive again. If you maintain this view, your karma will decrease, the effects to be received will diminish, you will become purer, and you will then be able to attain liberation.

Most people feel that what they give out should entitle them to get something back. What you do now is done for rewards received later. You have children now so they can take care of you later. People plant fruit trees so that they might eat the apple or the pears at harvest. This is the hope for a return on

effort invested. In Buddhism this is an inverted view.

A young man I knew believed in this principle, and accordingly he felt uncomfortable about taking money for the work he did. I asked him how he supposed that he would be able to live, if he didn't have money. But he was confused and wondered how he could attain liberation if he went on benefiting from his actions. I suggested to him that he look at his work as directly helping sentient beings, as something which would create good karma. As for the money, he could use a minimum amount for his own needs, and help other people with the rest.

The final category of inversion is that which applies to someone who has attained liberation. This is the invertedness that is referred to in the *Shurangama Sutra*. There are many who would like to escape their suffering. I was once asked if it was the point of Buddhism to escape from the suffering of the world. I said Buddhism will help you to escape from the suffering, but not the world. I was asked, "You mean if you were to chop up a liberated person, he would feel no pain?" No, only the dead feel no pain. For the truly liberated there is still pain, but there is no vexation. What is vexation? It is a wish or desire for something which is there to cease to be there, or for something that is not there to come into existence. There is no such desire in a liberated person. A miser will feel great pain if he loses even one dollar. Though very rich, he will feel as if he suffered damage to his own body. A generous person will be glad to share what he has, even if it is very little.



If you fear death or injury, then you have vexations concerning the body. If you treat your body and possessions as empty space, then you need not be vexed about them. A liberated person owns nothing. Should he fear death, it would be an inverted view. If a Bodhisattva viewed the action he took to help others as a cause leading to an effect, then this would be an inverted view. Cause and effect may have meaning on the first level, the worldly view, but they do not apply at the level of liberation. The reason for this is that for cause and effect to operate, there must be a sense of self: something to cause the cause and something to be affected by the effect. But a Bodhisattva has no sense of self, and is therefore not subject to cause and effect.

A Bodhisattva must be willing to take in anything, no matter how big or small; he must be willing to give out anything if it is in his possession. He can give out gifts, and he can receive gifts, but what he gets is not a cause, and what he gives is not an effect.

The Bodhisattva receives something, but it is as if he received nothing. He gives, but it is like he gave nothing. It is like a boat which has a hose to draw the sea up on the port side and which pours the water back to starboard. The ocean itself is neither increased nor decreased. It may seem strange that a Bodhisattva gets nothing for his work, but that's how it is for a Bodhisattva, all work and nothing else. Were he not working, he wouldn't be a Bodhisattva.

In the highest point of view, there is no cause and no effect, and there is no need to be afraid of cause and effect. From

the liberated point of view, if there is cause and effect, then there is inversion. If you draw water from the ocean and let it spill out again, you can't consider this cause and effect. Nothing has been gained or lost.

A liberated person is free of karma. Karma still exists, but he is not bound by it. It's like a person who visits someone in jail. The visitor is not imprisoned, though he might be in the jail temporarily. The one in jail is bound there. I once went on a long secluded retreat. This was my choice. Had it been involuntary, it would have been a very different experience.

## The Five Eyes

December 22, 1985

Ananda reached an understanding of the limits of perception itself, and so he asked the Buddha how he would be able to know his true nature. The Buddha replied: *“Ananda, though you have not yet reached the state beyond the stream of transmigration, you may now use the Buddha’s transcendent power to behold the first dhyana heaven without obstruction, like Anirudha who sees this world as clearly as fruit held in his own hand. Bodhisattvas can see hundreds and thousands of worlds. Buddhas in the ten directions can see all the Pure Lands as countless as the dust. As to living beings, their range of sight is (sometimes) limited to inches.”*

The Buddha explains to Ananda that beings on different levels, although they may look at the same thing, will really see it according to their own perspective. The Buddha then continues to talk about different levels of vision. The Buddha sees all things as equal, undifferentiated, but he can also see things as ordinary beings see them. The Buddha explains how things are perceived from five different levels. They are:

The physical eye of ordinary sentient beings  
The heavenly eye  
The eye of an Arhat  
The eye of a Bodhisattva  
The eye of the Buddha

The first level, which is also called the “physical eye,”

includes animals and all beings in the realm of desire. This eye can see material things, but it can also be blocked. If a piece of paper is put in front of your eyes, vision is blocked. If the paper is removed, you can see. This eye is quite limited. You can't see things that are too big, too small, too far, or too close. The physical eye is so weak that it is almost useless.

There are two kinds of heavenly eyes. First, there is the eye which is achieved only through the practice of meditation by those who have cultivated samadhi and reached the first level of dhyana. Second, there is the eye which is achieved on the basis of accumulated good merit.

An ordinary human being can achieve the heavenly eye through meditation and the achievement of the first level of dhyana, or he can achieve it through the grace of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, or heavenly beings. An ordinary human being could not attain the heavenly eye through accumulated merit. One who had enough accumulated merit would already be born in the heavenly realm, not in the human realm.

The Arhat eye, also known as the “wisdom eye,” is the third level of attainment. It is called the wisdom eye because the Arhat has attained wisdom and eliminated all vexations. Those with the physical eye or the heavenly eye still have vexations. The sutra says that when an Arhat observes this world, he sees it the same way an ordinary being sees a mango in his hand, and he sees it with complete clarity. He can not only see this world, but he can see a great chiliocosm of worlds. Why is his vision so vast? He no longer has a sense of self; therefore the chiliocosm is there before him,

unobstructed by his own perceptions or interests.

The next kind of eye, the Bodhisattva eye, is also called the “Dharma eye.” Why is this eye, and not that of the Arhat, called the Dharma eye? Even though the Arhat has liberated himself from self, or ego, there is still a sense of discrimination between the realms of birth and death; but for the Bodhisattva there is neither birth nor death, neither samsara nor nirvana. He has no attachment to the Dharma, and thus he has the Dharma eye.

The Arhat can see one great chiliocosm, but the Bodhisattva can view 100,000 great chiliocosms. There is no comparison between the Arhat eye and the Bodhisattva eye.

The Buddha’s vision is the greatest. The Buddha eye can see all the Buddha lands in the ten directions. The Buddha’s eye is the most perfect. The way Buddha sees has nothing in common with our ideas of far and near, large and small.

These are the five kinds of eyes. Now we can return to the sutra and ask what kind of problem Ananda was having. He was not an Arhat, and he didn’t have psychic power or the heavenly eye; he only had a normal human eye. The Buddha appeared in the world not just for Bodhisattvas and Arhats, but for ordinary sentient beings as well. He explains the Buddha eye to ordinary sentient beings because they tend to believe that what they see is all there is, and that that is right and correct. According to the Buddha’s view, there is nothing that is right, nothing that is wrong. If the Buddha and an ordinary sentient being look at the same thing, they

both see it, but they each see it differently. When the Buddha looks at something, he sees into its empty nature, its original nature. Common people look at the material nature of things – shape, color, and quality. The Buddha looks at true nature.

In early Chinese literature there was a Taoist philosopher named Chuang-tzu. One day he was talking to another philosopher, Hui Shih, and they were both standing on a bridge overlooking a river. Chuang-tzu said, “Look at the fish, see how happy they are.” Hui Shih replied, “You’re not a fish – how do you know how happy they are?” Chuang-tzu countered, “You’re not me. How do you know that I don’t know how happy the fish are?”

These two men had very different perspectives. Chuang-tzu is at one with the fish, and really knows what they are feeling. Hui Shih still discriminates between himself and the fish, so he has no idea how they feel.

There’s a Chan story concerning two patriarchs, Ma-tzu and Pai-chang. These two masters were walking, when a flock of geese flew over them. The elder patriarch asked Pai-chang, “What was that?” Pai-chang replied, “Those are wild geese.” Ma-tzu then asked, “What about now?” And Pai-chang said, “They’ve flown away.” Ma-tzu grabbed Pai-chang’s nose, squeezed very hard, and demanded, “They flew away?” Pai-chang’s nose really hurt, and he started to cry, but then he started to laugh uproariously. People thought he went crazy.

At the beginning of their walk, when the geese first flew over them, what they saw was different. But at the end of the story

they were both seeing the same thing. When Ma-tzu saw the geese, he saw them, as we say in Chan, with “no coming, no going, no dying, no being born” – how then could he say that the geese flew away? When Pai-chang first saw the geese, he had the mind of discrimination. When the geese flew away, his mind flew away with them. But when Ma-tzu grabbed Pai-chang’s nose, Ma-tzu brought Pai-chang’s mind back. When the pain was great enough, Pai-chang was right there again. He saw for himself that he was unmoving, that the geese were unmoving. His tears and his laughter were both expressions of his joy. In the beginning they had different eyes, but in the end their eyes were the same.

The experience of these patriarchs is different from the story of Chang-tzu and Hui Shih. Chang-tzu was at one with nature, but he was still moving with nature. Ma-tzu was also at one with nature, but his mind was not moving, therefore, nature was not moving for him.

In Chan we only consider it important to deal with two of the five eyes, the physical eye and the Buddha eye. There is no need to bother with the heavenly eye, the wisdom eye, or the Dharma eye. In the gradual school of practice all five eyes would be included. But the sudden school of practice begins with the worldly eye and moves directly to the Buddha eye. This is what Pai-chang did. He moved immediately from the material view to the point where he could see the empty, unmoving nature of all things.

In this sutra the Buddha is trying to help Ananda take the step directly from the physical eye to a realization of the Buddha

eye. He does not talk about the three stages in between. But since we have some time, I will go more deeply into the differences between the worldly eye, the heavenly eye, and a sub-level called the deva, or ghostly eye.

Have you ever seen a ghost or a god? Normally people can't see things that are too far, near, big, or small. But some people borrow the power of a ghost or other spiritual being, and gain spiritual vision. There are also cases of heavenly beings who are born into the human realm, who still retain some ability to see ghosts and spirits in the realms below. They can no longer see into the heavenly realm, nor can they see ghosts and spirits in the human realm.

I had a student who came here for a beginner's class. She claimed to have some psychic power. She said that when she was well-concentrated, she could see into people's past, but I had my doubts. I asked her if she could see into my past. I have heavy karmic obstructions, which have their root in past lives, but still she could see nothing of my past. Why? People are not always reborn into the human realm. They might be born into a distant world, and ordinary psychic power would be too limited to see that far. It would be similar to a person who commits a crime in Taiwan and moves to New York. The New York police would have no record of the crime.

The deva, or ghostly, eye stands at a level between the physical and heavenly eyes. This phenomenon occurs when a spiritual being uses the eye of a human being as a medium. People who have experienced this believe that they have been endowed with great spiritual powers, but it is really the



power of the spiritual being at work. There is a book about a spirit called Seth who used a woman's body to talk to people in this world. He could only talk through her.

I have a Dharma brother who has such powers. He was once sitting on a train, and suddenly he saw all the people sitting around him as pigs and dogs and other animals. He could see the changes that these people went through in various past lives, but he could see no further. This is not really his power, but that of a spiritual being working through him. I asked him if he could see such things with his eyes closed, and he answered no, but there are people who have such powers.

In the sutra Buddha talks about a disciple, Anirudha. He is a good example of someone who developed the heavenly eye. He practiced very hard. He sat for days with his eyes open, and he never slept. Eventually, he went blind from keeping his eyes open. The Buddha went to visit him and told him not to worry. He said that the physical eye is of little use anyway, and there are better eyes to acquire. The Buddha explained to Anirudha how to practice, and in a short time he had the heavenly eye. As he penetrated deeper into dhyana, his vision became truly vast.

Those who are born in the realm of desire with the heavenly eye, because of their previous good karma, are always born in heavenly realms. Those born as humans in the realm of form must obtain the heavenly eye through meditation. Normally, human beings cannot see ghosts, and the ghosts that are here cannot see us. The more powerful beings in the

heavenly realms can see us, but spiritual beings here cannot. They can sense our existence, but they can't tell exactly where we are. Only by borrowing an earthly eye can they see more accurately. An English psychologist who was able to leave his body reported seeing just this sort of thing; he saw ghosts and humans, but they could not see each other.

The heavenly eye can observe all manner of beings in the realm of form: animals, humans, ghosts, spirits, and heavenly beings. This eye can see into the past and future for 500 to 1,000 lives. But looking into the past and looking into the future are two distinct psychic powers. In the six heavenly realms, the lower realms cannot see into the realms above them. Why? Because the body becomes more and more subtle as you ascend into these realms. A being in the highest heavenly realm can see throughout his realm and all the realms below. Such a being can see us and know us as if we were specks in the palm of his hand.

Common people cannot really understand this heavenly eye. It has to be experienced. Sometimes someone in Canada might be able to see what's going on in the United States, or someone in United States can see things in Hong Kong. This is not the heavenly eye at all. It is still the ghostly or spiritual eye. The heavenly eye, within its realm, knows what is going on in all places at all times.

I'm not going to speak about the Arhat eye or the Bodhisattva eye. I will speak directly about the Buddha eye. It is really quite simple. The Buddha sees everything as emptiness. This does not mean that he sees nothing when he looks at

something or someone. It means that he sees the empty nature of the things he sees. Levels below the Buddha can see emptiness also, but emptiness is experienced like air in a box. It takes the shape of the container. There is still separateness. For the Buddha, according to this analogy, air is everywhere, and it is not segmented. Even the Bodhisattva, who has the Dharma eye, does not see in this way. Only when you reach Buddhahood, do you see with unobstructed limitlessness.

The Buddha explains to Ananda that he must see into the true nature of things. In this way he will see his own true nature. This is what the Chan sect calls “seeing into your own true nature.” But this can be somewhat misleading, because it might sound as if your true nature is something separate from yourself. That is not the case. Your true nature is your self; it is not apart from it. This is why the *Shurangama Sutra* is classified as a sutra of true permanence, because it leads us to our true nature.

## **Mind, Matter, and Emptiness**

January 5, 1986

Ananda continues to question the Buddha about the essence of seeing, and he asks how he can tell the seeing from the seen. More and more Ananda is beginning to understand what the Buddha says.

In this section of the sutra there are three important questions asked:

Who or what is doing the seeing?

What is seen?

What is the relationship between the seer and the seen?

Ananda says that, as he now understands it, the person seeing and the thing seen are neither different nor the same; neither are they empty or existing. The Buddha replies, “Correct, correct.” Easy to understand, is it not? It is? Well, in that case, that’s the end of today’s lecture [jokingly].

That which can see is me. That part of me which does the seeing is my mind. And what constitutes “I” would seem to constitute the mind. Anything that can be seen is an object of the mind. Usually we think of ourselves as separate from any object we come into contact with. We are not the same as what we touch. But as I’ve said in the past, the mind does not simply lie within the body. So “I” is not exactly the same as my “mind.” I and mind are not exactly the same things. So things external to me are neither me nor my mind. Does the

mind exist? It is neither internal nor external; neither apart from self nor apart from matter. We can also say that the mind is indeed me and it is external phenomena.

The Buddha said that the mind is neither internal nor external; neither self nor external phenomena. Then what is the mind? Ananda has not yet discovered what it is. Nobody knows what it is? We can, however, arrive at a theoretic understanding: the mind is empty. It is emptiness.

Once we have come to this realization, it follows that the self also does not exist. It is false. It is not real. So it is with external phenomena. All of these things are empty. But this is just theory. In daily life we see most things as real and existing, and we think of mind as self. What we mean by this is that all movements of the mind, all thoughts, reflections, what is seen and felt – these are what comprise the mind.

A deeper level of understanding sees the true mind, the unmoving mind. This is emptiness. This is the perfect mind. The shallower level experiences the world as real and emptiness as only an idea, a theory. The deeper level experiences emptiness directly.

If the mind is real, is the external world real or unreal? I've often asked, when we die do the things that we now see continue to exist? Are they still here? Yes, of course. Washington helped establish the United States. He died over 200 years ago, but America is still here. What about your world? Will it still be here when you go? How do we know that there is a world or a New York City for example? We

know because we mutually acknowledge its existence. Then consider this question: in your mind, what kind of a city is New York? What kind of a country is the United States? Perhaps that's too much to consider. Let's narrow our scope. Your husband, what kind of person is he? Your wife, what kind of person is she? And what kind of person are you? We must realize that we each see a different New York City, a different United States. A wife may have a particular view of her husband, but then again, his mother will have quite a different view of him. There are many views, but only one person.

Today Mrs. Shih cooked a wonderful meal, and she chatted about how good her children are. Mr. Shih also said nice things about his kids. Nevertheless they don't see their children in exactly the same way.

What about you? What kind of person are you really? Do you know?

I met someone recently almost a year after I had last seen him. A year ago he professed to be full of self-confidence. He was bursting with ideas about the things he wanted to accomplish. But now he says, "My whole outlook has changed. The person I was when you last talked to me was really quite immature. I've grown considerably since then."

What about the world we see? Is it real? Is it the same world for all of us? No, your world is not my world. My world is not yours. My world today is different from what my world will be tomorrow. My world last year is different from my



world today. When I die, my world will die with me. Why? It is because the mind is not really related to this world. There is no true objectivity. There may be some views that are common to everyone, but even they, upon examination, are different. Therefore the world that we see is not real. If it were real, it would not change incessantly. Our minds and the external world – are they the same or different?

We learn from the practice of Buddhism, or from Buddhist theory, that the mind and the external world are neither the same nor different. Here is a story to illustrate: The story concerns Tung-shan, the first patriarch of the T'sao-tung sect, who spoke with his disciple, Yin-yen. The latter said, "The ancients say that all phenomena speak the Dharma – the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Arhats, sentient, and even non-sentient beings." Tung-shan replied, "Yes, I have heard that it's true. Even non-sentient beings speak the Dharma." So Yin-yen asked the patriarch, "Have you heard non-sentient beings speaking the Dharma?" Tung-shan said, "If I heard non-sentient beings speak the Dharma, you would not be able to hear me speak the Dharma." Puzzled, the disciple asked, "Who is it who can hear non-sentient beings speak the Dharma?" Finally, the patriarch replied, "Only non-sentient beings hear non-sentient beings speak the Dharma." This idea so perplexed Yin-yen that it stuck inside his head and became what is known as a "ball of doubt," which is used as a gong'an (koan) in Chan practice.

Yin-yen became a wandering monk, practicing meditation, living sometimes at a temple, sometimes in the woods. One day, a few years after his meeting with Tung-shan, it began





to rain. Yin-yen started to ford a river, and as he waded in, he looked down and saw his reflection. In a single moment, he understood the answer to the gong'an.

Yesterday, I told this story to Karen. I said to her that there is a direct relationship between what Yin-yen saw when he looked in the water and the thought that his master put in his head many years before – that non-sentient beings hear the Dharma from non-sentient beings. What is the connection?

What is involved here is the question of whether mind and external phenomena are the same or different. Normally, we understand something when it is communicated to us through speech or some other medium. It is mind that allows us to communicate. Now, if non-sentient beings speak the Dharma, they must have minds to speak it with. If they have minds, they can't be non-sentient – they must feel and be aware. Therefore the non-sentient beings must really be sentient beings, right?

Yin-yen saw the non-sentient water, the non-sentient reflection in the water, and the non-sentient body the water reflected (the body without the mind would be non-sentient). He realized that his non-sentient reflection spoke the Dharma to his non-sentient body. Here is a case of a non-sentient being speaking the Dharma to a non-sentient being. Nevertheless, this is not a very high level of understanding in Chan. It is what we talk about when we say that mind and body become one, that mind and external phenomena become one. But you must go deeper than this to understand as Master Tung-shan understood.







Yin-yen had the realization that sentient and non-sentient beings are non-existent. Is this a very high level of understanding? No. The view that mind and body are the same, that self and external world are the same – this is the level of the expanded sense of self, the great “I.” To see that self, mind, body, and external world are all non-existent is to reach an understanding of emptiness itself. Reach this level and stop, and you will indeed have a pessimistic outlook on the world.

Go deeper and you arrive at the level of Tung-shan and Ananda. They understand that emptiness and existence are not two different things. Neither are mind and external phenomena two different things.

Let’s talk about the mind. Is there anything in it? If anything exists in the mind, it is only attachment. If there is nothing in the mind, that, too, is attachment. One extreme is the attachment to existence; the other, the attachment to emptiness. A beginning practitioner tends to attach to existence and not emptiness.

At the end of the last retreat, one of the participants brought his friend to talk to me. He said, “If Buddhism teaches that everything is empty, why bother to practice, since there seems like there’s nothing to attain.” I asked, “How do you know about emptiness?” He said, “I’ve read a little bit about Buddhism, and in every book it says that life is suffering, emptiness, impermanence, and no self exists. This is a pretty negative outlook on the world, and if that’s not emptiness, I don’t know what is.” My reply was, “You’re right, but I



think you should know a little bit more about emptiness.”

Emptiness can be broken down into two aspects: no-characteristic and no-desire. No-characteristic includes no birth, no death and no nirvana. No-desire includes no abiding in or departing from birth and death, no abiding in or departing from samsara. After he heard this, the friend was even more convinced that there was no need for practice: “There’s no need to wish for release from birth and death because they don’t exist, and there’s no nirvana to attain anyway. Why practice?”

I said, “For someone with your frame of mind, it is best to talk about existence, not emptiness.” He asked me, “What exists?” “Suffering,” I said. He countered, “All I hear Buddhism talking about is suffering. This bothers me – I’m really opposed to this teaching. It doesn’t seem reasonable. OK, there’s a certain amount of suffering in everybody’s life, but as far as I’m concerned, the time I don’t suffer far exceeds the time that I do.” I bet most of you agree with this, right?

The idea of suffering can be quite subtle. Of course, suffering includes the pain and distress that most people associate with the word. But impermanence itself is suffering. I heard some people here talking about the Radio City Music Hall Christmas show. They said it was wonderful, but it lasted only 90 minutes. It seemed like it ended almost as soon as it began. Is this happiness or suffering? Most people would say that this is a kind of happiness that passes quickly. They would hope to go again sometime. But how many

opportunities will there be in one lifetime? Finally, your chances to go will run out.

I asked the friend about his plans for the future. He said that he planned to do a great deal in his life, but he complained that there's not enough time to do all that he wants to do. "There were many things in the past that I wanted to do, also, but I never got around to them," he said. This, too, is suffering.

Why practice? We practice to leave suffering. Once we leave suffering, we reach emptiness. On retreats, when people complain of the pain in their legs, I say, "It's your legs that hurt, not you. It's not your mind. Just let your legs hurt." Most people give up and say, "I just can't stand the pain." Then I ask, "Is the pain real or illusory?" They will say it's real. I say, "No, you're wrong; it's illusory. If it's real, then give the pain to me. Hand it over." Then, they say, "As soon as I put my legs down, the pain disappears." I reply, "Therefore it's illusory. If it was true and real, then even when you put down your legs, the pain would still be there."

We must practice to understand emptiness. To try to understand emptiness without practice will almost certainly end in misunderstanding. You can read the sutras and try to understand the theory behind them, but it is doubtful that you will reach true emptiness. Emptiness is a high teaching in Buddhism, but we must understand that emptiness means not only emptiness of existence, but also the emptiness of emptiness. At this level one can truly see how positive and affirmative Buddhism really is.

A woman I know in Taiwan complained to me recently. She said that her children were giving her so much trouble that she wished she had become a nun instead of getting married. But the fact of the matter was that she was not a nun and she was married and had children. She asked, “When will these relationships with other beings end? This time I’m a mother – my creation of a child means creation of more karma. Next lifetime I will again have some relationship with the one who is my child in this lifetime. When will it all end?”

I told her that the relationship between people is real, but the suffering she feels is illusory and so is the child’s lack of obedience. And if Bodhisattva’s didn’t have other people to speak the Dharma to, they would not be able to become Bodhisattvas. If the Buddha had no one to speak to, he could not have become the Buddha. If she did not have her child, she would not be able to become a Bodhisattva. By having a child, she realizes how difficult it is to raise someone. And, something I emphasize for all Buddhist families, going through this gives you the opportunity to do something good for someone. You should be grateful for the opportunity. If your son or daughter reacts badly to your efforts, if he or she is not appreciative, it doesn’t matter. That’s their business. But the woman said, “If my life continues like this, I don’t see how I can attain liberation.” “It’s very easy,” I told her. “First, don’t desire liberation. Second, don’t be afraid of trouble.”

Another story also illustrates this: A disciple who visited his master asked, “Will you please help me to get rid of my vexations? The master replied “Who binds you? Who has

bound you?” True liberation is not sought after. True nirvana is not sought after.

Your attitude in daily life and the way you interact with your family is what's important. When you feel love and then attach to it, it is not liberation. When you feel hate and then attach to it, it is not liberation. If you want more of this and less of that, it is not liberation.

If you accept what you are given and you give freely of what you have, this is liberation. This idea of emptiness, where nothing exists, where you want nothing, and where nothing makes demands of you, is not true Mahayana Buddhism.

The other day I asked for donations. I used to be reluctant to do so. I thought, “When can I pay all these people back.” Once a woman gave me \$20 and said that she would like me to give her peace of mind. I just put the money in the donation basket and hoped that the accumulated merit might bring her some contentment. If she comes again, I might say, “Why not give \$200 or \$300?”

What's the principle here? When she donates, she really helps bring Buddhadharma to more people and she helps more people to practice Buddhism. Of course the result of the giving of that money may lead to peace of mind. But if I took that donation and went to see a movie, or went to Radio City Music Hall, or bought a bottle of liquor, then sooner or later I would have to pay back the donor.

Do you think that I am always calculating about how I can

get more money? Do you think I look at Marla and say, “Hmm, I bet she’s worth something?” Or do I think about Peter or Nagendra in terms of what good jobs they have and how much I could get from them?” I know Harry just bought a co-op. He must have money.

But the money should come through a natural process. We don’t need to bother or think a great deal about it. If you think about money all the time, it is certainly not true emptiness. If you absolutely avoid money, that is also not true emptiness. Even a very serious Zen practitioner will have some money at times. Most Buddhist practitioners still work. At one point Chris didn’t have a job, but now he does. Do I have a job? What is my job? I don’t feel like I have a job. Whenever there’s attachment to something, there’s unhappiness. Avoid thinking about what you’re going to get for your work. If you do not attach to what you do, nothing you do will seem like work.

## A Second Moon

Sunday, May 11, 1986

*The Buddha said: As you see me now, the essence of your seeing is originally clear. Although it is not the profound Bright Mind, it is like a second moon but is not a reflection of the moon (in water). Now listen attentively to my explanation of that which cannot return anywhere.(62)*

Most people believe that theirs is the correct point of view. If over time they see that what they believe to be true is false, they will alter their opinion, and come to believe their new, reevaluated point of view to be correct. There is, of course, progress in this process, where old views are continually discarded; but when do we have the correct viewpoint?

The *Shurangama Sutra* uses a particular analogy to illustrate this tendency to assume that what we believe in any given moment is absolutely true. When we look in the sky, we believe that we see the moon, the true moon, as it really is. But what ordinary sentient beings really see is a second moon, a false moon, a shadow of what is real.

Consider how inconsistent and inconstant our everyday views are of the things and people in our lives. Imagine how Elizabeth Taylor views the many husbands she has had over the years. Does she believe that the most recent is best? But after Richard Burton died, she is reported to have said that she loved him the best. What is she really looking for?

I have a student who is now in his 40's and over the years he has gone out with many, many women. He has always sought the ideal woman, and each time he introduces a woman to me, he declares that she is the best yet, far surpassing all the others. I ask him how he can be so sure, but it is like asking a man in the midst of a dream to see that he is dreaming.

Ordinary sentient beings lead their lives like a kind of crooked-leg worm that moves forward by grasping what is in front of it, then untangling its leg before it can move again. It is always grasping at one thing, and letting go of another. We are like that worm, always grasping the secondary, never the primary. The second moon not the first.

Distinguishing the second from the first moon requires understanding the nature of perception. To deal with this question we must be aware of that which understands and that which is understood. Are these two different phenomena, or are they one? Or is there yet another way to understand them?

We usually refer to that which knows as the self, “I,” or “you.” But in Buddhism this knowing entity, the self, is taken to be composed of two parts: one material, the other spiritual. We might consider the material part, which is variously referred to as the “root” or “organ” of consciousness, to be the nervous system. Can the nervous system exist and function independently of the spiritual part? No, from the Buddhist point of view, both the material and spiritual coexist. It is this combination that forms the entity that we call the self, the “I” or the “you” – that which knows.



The material and the spiritual aspects of the self cannot be considered to be combined into one entity or separated into two. Just consciousness, without a material adjunct, cannot function. The body, the nervous system, cannot function as the self, without its spiritual counterpart. Only when the material and the spiritual function together, do we then have a self. Neither can function without the other.

Next we must ask: if that which sees is the self, then what is that which is seen? That which is seen is everything that lies outside the self, including the spiritual and the material.

That which is seen by the self cannot be separate from the material, from matter. I can only sense or perceive a spiritual existence through interaction with matter. That which is seen is never apart from matter. In Buddhist terminology, what is seen is called the object or environment. Are the self and the environment two separate entities, or are they one?

Common sense tells us that “you” are not “me.” He or she is not “me.” All things we see – trees, grass, the floor, the furniture – are separate from ourselves.

This conventional understanding is what might lead me to pick your pocket, or you to pick someone else’s pocket. The same reasoning might lead you to pursue another woman when you are already in a relationship. There is a continual pursuit of things outside of us. We feel incomplete, and we seek to add something that we think we do not have.

When I first left home, my master took me aside and said,

“Sheng Yen, look at the world. Do you see how everyone tries to make a dollar off the other guy? If everyone takes everyone else’s money, whose money is it, anyway?” The only thing that I could think to say was that it seems like an inevitable process – everybody succeeds in making some money at others’ expense from time to time. But my master said, “You’re wrong. Nobody gets anything from anybody else. Everyone simply makes money from himself. You may be a businessman or you may be a thief. Nevertheless, you are the source of the money you make.” I had a difficult time understanding this. Do any of you understand?

Our environment is composed of six sense objects: what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think. Then we might assume that the “I” consists of the six sense organs – the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind – and the six associated consciousnesses. Thus, we might conclude that the environment is something outside ourselves; it is “not I.”

Today Judy Chen from the Lai Lai Restaurant provided the food for our lunch. We got something from her. If, at another time, another woman prepares our lunch, then we would get something from her. It seems that we always get something from someone else.

This is not so, because in reality, the six sense organs, the six sense objects, and the six sense consciousnesses are always together. The “I” and the environment are really not separate.

Someone who is blind has no idea of what is meant by “yellow,” “red,” or “green.” A beautiful flower, a beautiful

painting, or a beautiful woman means nothing. These things have no existence for the blind. For the deaf, beautiful sounds and beautiful music have no existence. By the same token each of us sees and hears something different from the other people around us. We each live in a unique world, our own universe. The environment in which we live, in which we are born, and in which we die is something that is unique to each of us. Even identical twins live in very different worlds. Even though a couple sleeps in the same bed night after night, it is a different bed for each partner.

This lecture is a different lecture for each of you. When you are born, your world appears. When you die, your world dies with you. Other people live and die in their own worlds.

We may believe that Judy prepared a delicious meal for us today, but truly speaking, we simply ate our own food. We got nothing from her. Of course, when she hears this she may stop bringing food to the Center. But in the same manner, she really ate all of the food that she brought here. We took nothing from her.

This is to say that what Judy is doing is cultivating her own environment. Whatever she does will affect her environment, her world. What she sows, she will reap. It doesn't make any difference whether or not we pay her back for what she has given us. She will reap the consequence of her actions in her own world.

If you work hard for something and you dedicate your efforts to another person, to the temple, or perhaps to the

Buddha, this is what the Taiwanese, adopting a term from the Japanese, call “making a deposit.” You have something of worth, and you deposit it somewhere. For a Christian, it is making a deposit in the kingdom of heaven, where God reckons all accounts. Whether God does take care of these accounts is another question. But the fact is that when you act, you make a deposit and the merits or faults are stored. It is these deposits, the consequences of your acts that will affect you and you alone.

Thus, when robbers and thieves steal from someone, they really steal from themselves. They steal from their own world. It is said that an octopus will feed on its own limbs when it is starving. It is the same with robbers and thieves. It seems that they get something from someone else. But when something is obtained falsely – not through your own efforts – you pay it back, eventually. It is not just the principle that you will pay; interest will be added, too.

Let me go back to my earlier question. Are the “I,” – that which sees – and the object, – that which is seen – one or separate things? If they were one, then there would be no way to distinguish between what sees and what is seen. If they were two separate things, they would exist in and of themselves, and there would be no relation between them. The answer is, then, that what sees and what is seen cannot be said to be one thing and cannot be said to be two.

If you really understood and accepted this principle, you would see how pointless quarrels are between couples, fights between brothers, or the ending of friendships. A husband

would consider a quarrel between his wife and himself as his own right foot stepping on his left. It would be like him biting his own tongue.

With this attitude, you will find any place or any time full of promise. Thinking of someone you meet for the first time as a stranger will be as absurd as thinking that your left eye has just met your right. You know that they have always been together.

If you really affirmed these principles and saw the truth in them, then there would be no conflict, confrontation, or misunderstanding that you could not resolve.

Now, do you think that I'm talking about the first or the second moon? I will keep you in suspense for a while. Later on in the *Shurangama Sutra*, the Buddha asks Manjushri whether there is another Manjushri besides himself, or if there is a Manjushri who first "is" and then "is not." Manjushri replies that he is the only Manjushri, and is present, but neither "is" nor "is not." This may seem to be difficult to comprehend, but what is really behind it is what I said earlier – that we each live in our own world of six sense organs, six sense consciousnesses, and six sense objects. This is an illusory world, and it is that which leads us to think of something or someone as existing or not existing, because we judge from our own point of view. That which is real is non-dualistic. It is unchanging and neither is nor "is not." The second moon is this illusory world, a reflection of the real.

You might ask, "Does the first moon, the real moon, have a

real existence?” The answer is no. Let me elaborate. If you see the moon in a mirror or shining in a pond, common sense tells you that you see a reflection, a second moon, not the real moon at all. Reasoning in this way, you might be led to believe that the moon you see in the sky is the real moon. But this, too, is a second moon. Why is that? The moon we see in the sky is only a reflection itself, of sunlight bouncing off the moon’s surface. What could we do to get closer to the real moon? We could take a spaceship to the moon and then look at it. It would be quite different from our usual conception. Our romantic conception of a bright, shining orb would be replaced by an ugly, pock-mocked wasteland. Even the moon in the sky is itself an illusion, a product of our imagination.

We often believe something is real or not real according to our perspective. There is a beautiful mountain range in China which contains a famous mountain, Mt. Lu. There is a poem which states that when you are on Mt. Lu, you cannot see the beauty and grandeur that has moved poets and writers to sing its praises. You can only see Mt. Lu’s beauty from a distance. What you see when you are on the mountain is entirely different. When you look at Mt. Lu from a distance, do you see the real Mt. Lu? No, not all. Do you see the real mountain when you are on it? Again, the answer is no. The mountain you see will be different from the one I see. Again, this analogy shows that you may think that you grasp the first moon, but all you really hold is the second moon.

As you can see, Buddhism recognizes different levels of reality. Much of what we have spoken about – common

sense and the varieties of perception – belongs to the realm of philosophy. There is yet another reality: a spiritual reality that is the fruit of mystical or religious experience. Many religions may call this the experience of God, although the interpretation and understanding of the concept of God may vary greatly from religion to religion.

Someone asked me how it could be that there are so many different religions in the world, and that they all, including Buddhism, claim to be the one, true religion. I said, “Every one of them is the real, true religion.” “If that’s so,” she said, “then all these religions should be combined together to form one, great religion.” I replied, “It’s precisely because the adherents of each religion consider theirs to be the one and only true religion that all religions cannot be combined together. There is no one willing to admit that his approach is not the best or that there may be some fallacy to his approach.” No, it would be impossible to combine all religions.

Buddhism, however, does distinguish two kinds of reality. One is called transcendental reality, meaning “that which is beyond this world.” The second reality comprises both that which is of this world and that which transcends this world.

The “beyond this world” school maintains that everything we see is in constant flux. Everything is an illusion, a second moon. But this school maintains further that it is possible to transcend this illusory world into an eternal, unchanging world that is ultimate reality.

But according to Chan Buddhism, this view that there is

an ultimate reality beyond what we see is itself an illusion. Ordinary sentient beings foolishly hold on to things that are constantly changing and disappearing. This is their reality. Others, who are equally foolish, hold on to the outer, eternal world. They are still the prisoners of a system, a structure of beliefs. Ordinary sentient beings hold on to existence, and these others hold on to non-existence. Those who hold these views are like the crooked-leg worms I spoke of – always grasping on to one thing, and then letting go of another, never reaching the primary, first moon, only gazing at the second moon.

It is the Chan view – of the reality of both this world and the unchanging world – that leads us not to be attached to the world, but not to run away from it, either. We simply try to live a very solid life without frantically seeking things outside ourselves. Take when it's time to take. Let go when it's time to let go. Do not try to hold on to anything. Do not try to rid yourself of what has come to you. It is not good to have attachments, but it is equally bad to believe that you can rid yourself of this world and move to some other, eternal reality.

If money comes to you, let it come. If it starts to disappear, do not be concerned. This is an attitude of non-attachment. The reason for this is that when the money comes, you really haven't received anything. Nothing has been added to you. When the money goes, you haven't really lost anything. Nothing has been taken away from you.

This is not to say that maintaining such an attitude is easy. If



your wife goes off with another man, or your husband with another woman, do you think you would just say, “Fine, let them go”? If your children, who you’ve taken so much labor and so many years to raise should leave, or if a long-time friend should stop talking to you, would you simply accept it and let him go? Most likely you would be very unhappy.

Only once in my life have I seen someone who had a totally non-possessive attitude. I’ve told this before, but I will mention it once again. This is a Chinese man who lives in Taiwan. His wife ran away with an American, and they went to live together in Hong Kong. His friends were very angry and upset for him, but he said, “I’m quite happy. This shows what good taste I had.” After some time his wife returned, and he held a banquet for her. He was happy again. “The fact that she returned shows what a good husband I really am.” This doesn’t necessarily mean that the man is frivolous or not serious. It’s just that he has a different perspective.

I hope my talk on the second moon has been helpful. You can look at yourselves and see if it is the first or the second moon that you are holding on to. Actually, no matter what I spoke about today, I really spoke about the second moon, because the first moon is not subject to concepts – there is nothing that can be said about it. And in reality it is in the first moon that we all live.

## False and True Self

June 1, 1986

Ananda asks the Buddha about the nature of the self. Is there an all-encompassing ego, a true self that unites everyone in the world, or is there a self at all?

I'm going to talk about this question, and discuss how it is dealt with by "outer path" systems of thought and religion, and how it is dealt with by Buddhism. Schools of philosophy and religion other than Buddhism are categorized as outer path because the adherents to these views attempt to look outside the mind for solutions to the problems of the world.

When we use the phrase outer path, there is no connotation that such views are bad or heterodox. "Heterodox" is used in Charles Luk's translation [of the *Shurangama Sutra*], and this is perhaps unfortunate, because it connotes something that is wrong, whereas the idea of "outer path" simply signifies the idea of looking outside to resolve problems, not looking inward.

In the retreat that ended here at the Center recently, there was a psychologist from England who told me that he heard things at the retreat that he had never heard before, and he believes that this knowledge will be of great use to him. I asked him, "What did you learn?" He said, "These lines in the evening service really impressed me: 'To know all the Buddhas of the past, present, and future, know that dharmadhatu nature is all created by the mind.'" I asked, "How do they help you?"

And he said, “For example, if your legs hurt, you need not be afraid of the pain. You can concentrate on it, and it will eventually turn to coolness. Pain is created by the mind, so it can be ended by the mind.”

This psychologist told me that what he usually does to help his patients is either to use talk therapy or administer drugs. But he had never before understood that to accept pain is a way to resolve it. So I asked him if he thought this method would apply to everyone. “Probably not,” he said, “it would only be useful to a strong-willed, goal-oriented person. Otherwise I doubt that the method would be useful.”

This method may not be applicable to everybody, but the principle behind it is valid. This is to say that problems must be seen as existing in the mind. Certainly, if you get a flat tire or you’re wounded, that is a problem. That is to say it is an unforeseen occurrence which must be taken care of. But usually the reality of what must be done is nothing compared to the way such occurrences are seen and exaggerated by our minds.

There are also many things which we normally perceive as problems which have no basis in reality, which are entirely created by our minds. To someone whose mind is clear, a thing or an event which might strike another person as an “objective” problem will have no existence at all. Buddhadharma considers other philosophical and religious approaches to be outer paths, then, for the following reason: these schools of thought perceive a variety of things or phenomena as problems, and they see the origin of these

problems in a variety of conceptual factors that lie outside the true domains of the mind. Thus, they will attribute the cause of a given problem to any of a number of factors: physical, psychological, social, familial, and so on. Such perceptions are not true. In the view of Buddhadharma all such problems and their causes exist within the mind.

Outer path views which seek solutions outside of the mind have an understanding of the self that is different from that of Buddhadharma. Some view the true self as something internal, a sort of primary essence. Others see it as something external, like a great over-soul that unites everyone and transcends the personal self. People who hold this view consider the true self to be something that pervades the ten directions. To look for the answer outside the mind in this manner is to be on an outer path.

There's a joke that shows how people live inside their narrow views. Note that in China, surgeons are called "external doctors," since they approach the body from the outside. Others who treat disorders with medicine are called "internal doctors." The story is this: a surgeon, an external doctor, visits a patient sent to a hospital with the flu. The doctor takes one look at him, cuts him open, finds nothing amiss, and leaves, saying, "I've done all I can. It looks like you need an internal doctor." The internal doctor arrives and asks, "Do you feel any pain?" The patient says, "You bet, the pain is killing me." The internal doctor finds the patient's reaction to a mild case of influenza to be bizarre. He tells the patient, "You're suffering from delusions. I'm going to recommend a psychiatrist." The psychiatrist enters and

asks, “What do you feel?” The patient answers, “Pain, a lot of pain, right here where the surgeon opened me up.” The psychiatrist says, “That’s not my turf. You’d better call back that external doctor.”

What is the problem here? Each doctor treats the patient according to his own specialty. No one tries to understand the problem in its totality. Each acts according to what he knows, not what troubles the patient.

Let me return to the concept of the true self. It is not something generally understood by ordinary people, who tend to know only their personal selves and what they can see, hear, taste, touch, and smell. This is really a very limited domain. What is beyond this narrow realm of the individual and the senses? Is there a self beyond what we know, beyond what we can perceive?

It may seem that there is a true self that can reach through all space and time. Certainly ordinary people do not have the vaguest notion of the concept of such a true self. Only people who have practiced hard or read and thought deeply in philosophy arrive at such an understanding. A religious practitioner may be able to experience a higher plane of existence outside of him. A person with deep philosophical understanding can deduce a self beyond himself. Only such people as these can try to come to an understanding of a true self.

The other day I read about a man who underwent surgery to receive a new heart. He found out after the operation, that

the heart was not mechanical, but was that of an animal. He may have thought, “What am I really, an animal or a human being?” He also lost a lot of blood and had several transfusions. Most of his blood was other people’s blood. So he might have thought, “Who am I now?”

What do you think, is he his original self or not? Maybe there will come a day when even brain tissue can be replaced. Who knows? We might be able to become smarter. Or perhaps someone in an accident might suffer brain damage, and his brain will be replaced with a computer chip. Who would he be then? People will have to reflect on questions such as these. Usually, when you refer to a true self, ordinary people will point to themselves and say, “This is my true self. No doubt about it. Every part of what you see is me.” But when parts of the body start getting replaced, people may begin to wonder.

When I first met Westerners, I was a child in China. There was something about the way they smelled that I had never experienced before. Later I understood that it was a question of diet. I, and those around me, had not grown up on a diet of meat and milk. That’s why I thought some of these Westerners smelled like cattle. But now I also drink milk, and I’m around many other people with a similar diet. I don’t sense anything different now. Who knows? Maybe I have the same kind of body odor as the Westerners I first met.

Your body was given to you by your parents. First you were a baby; now you’re grown. During these years you may have eaten all manner of different things: beef, pork, chicken,

milk, cheese. You used the nutrients from these sources to build your body, but you do not doubt what you are. You are a human being even though parts of many animals have been introduced into your system and worked to transform your body.

Milarepa, the great Tibetan master, lived in the mountains in a place where there was nothing to eat but wild grass. As a result, his body turned green. I lived in the mountains also, and for a few years I ate nothing but potato leaves. People asked me why I didn't turn green. It was because I cooked the leaves first.

A lot of people assume that their body is their self. But this cannot be. Before you were born, you did not exist in your body. After you die, the body cannot accompany you. In what sense, then, do you really exist?

Questions such as these cause us to distinguish between a self, meaning the self you can see and feel at the present moment, and a true self. Do you believe that there is an existence before birth and after death? Why do you believe what you do?

Many people ask themselves such questions. I read that after Richard Burton died, Elizabeth Taylor dreamed, or thought, she actually saw him. What do you think she believes? Does he still exist, or is he just a figment of her imagination?

I once spoke with a Christian, who asked me if I believed in heaven and hell. "Sure," I said. And he, too, said that he

believed in them. But are there any differences between what he and I believe?

There are some paintings in the West that represent the visions of painters, who actually saw people in the afterlife. Interestingly enough, in these paintings there are only Western faces. How can that be? Since we know that Orientals die, too, and, according to the Christian view, they must go to either heaven or hell. Why weren't any Orientals seen there? In more recent paintings, Orientals do appear.

I pointed out to him that it didn't make sense for the heaven and the hell of the past to be different from the heaven and hell of the present. If there is a difference between the past and the present, these places cannot be considered eternal, and, therefore, they can't be real, because what is real is permanent and unchanging. There was even a president of an African country who was a Christian and believed that God is black. He believed that only blacks, and not whites, go to heaven. Although he claimed to be a Christian, his concept of Christianity seems to be somewhat different from that of white Christians.

Then the Christian asked me what my views of heaven and hell were. That brings us back to the beginning of the lecture, when I said that everything is created by the mind. You have your heaven, and I have mine. You have your hell, and I have mine. You may see me in your heaven, and I may see you in mine. Nevertheless, they're not the same. We're all here in America, but I have come from China. The America I see is different from the America you see. Even two people that



share the same bed really share two different beds. And the world we live in? Are we all in the same world?

Some of you seem to think that we all live in the same physical world, that we all see the same rain outside. Actually the rain that falls on you will not fall on me. Hence, what you feel and see is not what I feel and see. Perhaps the simplest example is that of a chair. If I sit here, you have to sit somewhere else. And, of course, the seats we sit on are different to begin with.

If we use food as an example, we may all have the same dishes in front of us, but what I eat and how much I eat is different from what you eat. You may find it delicious. I may not be so pleased. You may find it good today and not so good tomorrow. Our perceptions are different.

Only advanced practitioners, through much hard work and practice, can live in the same world. They must achieve the exact same mind. We call this the state of one-mind. If your mind is scattered, you can't live in or experience the same world as another person.

Up until now I haven't really spoken about the true self. What most of us believe to be the self is an emotional self, so to speak. This is the self that we know when we are under the influence of emotions, feelings, and moods. This is not the self that wisdom can see.

Only someone no longer troubled by his emotions can seriously try to know his true self. Some people come to the

Center hoping to find enlightenment immediately. They hope I will provide a wonderful method to lead them to liberation, but I never do this. What I do is to first give a method that can be used to quiet the emotions. When there is some relief, I may then give a method to seek the true self. I might give the huatou, “Who am I?” or “What is wu?”

Although I give methods to seek the true self, this does not mean that Buddhадharma accepts the doctrine or the existence of a true self. Of course, this search for the self is central to many outer path beliefs. But in Chan this search is also a necessary step. This does not mean that there is, in fact, a true self to be found. But many methods of Chan practice are devoted to the discovery of the true self.

If you ask an ordinary person about his conception of the Buddha, he might come up with something like: the Buddha is what is unchanging, all-pervasive, and most perfect, the ultimate true existence.

The purpose of Chan practice is not to discover the Buddha. In the course of practice you may try to use your power of reason and your understanding of Buddhism. To the question, “What is Buddha,” you might be lead to answer that he is the awakened one, or the most perfect one. But such answers are wrong.

All such answers – that Buddha pervades through all time and space, that Buddha is that which never changes, the eternal, and the unmoving – are wrong. The opposing viewpoints – that Buddha is not in space or time or is outside

all concepts – are equally wrong. You must try to not cling to either extreme and to let go of the center, as well – this is Madhyamika, the middle way. Could this be the way to find true self?

If you continue to hold on to a concept such as a true self, or an idea of something that pervades through all space and time, then you are holding on to an attachment. Buddhadharma does not speak of true self; it speaks only of causes and conditions.

You might ask if causes and conditions are the true Dharma, the true way. No, these are only concepts, expedient ways of explaining things. Nevertheless, I will speak about these things next time.

## **Nature, or Spontaneity, and Causes and Conditions**

June 9, 1986

Reasoning by his worldly sense, Ananda is puzzled about the nature of the self. Where, he wonders, is the self revealed? Can it be found in the nature of the senses themselves? Is the self manifested in the nature of seeing, for example? The Buddha explains to Ananda that this quest for the self is in vain.

Ananda is still confused by the “outer path” views of “natural existence” and “true self.” He believes that there is something behind the “true self,” which he takes to be “nature” or “spontaneity.” Yet even this idea of “nature” and “spontaneity” is involved with a self. Ananda knows that his views are not correct, and he asks the Buddha for instruction.

The Chinese word which is translated here as “nature” really refers to something in its true state, the way it really is. The self in its true state is not the self we normally associate with someone’s personality. The true self is a totally natural and spontaneous state; it is just as it is, so to speak. But even the true self is not the “supreme reality.”

Earlier in the sutra the Buddha asked Ananda to explain what happens when he looks at the scenery outside the vihara. Who does the seeing? Is it Ananda’s true self that sees or does the act of seeing simply transpire spontaneously? This question has yet to be resolved.

Ananda does not see as the Buddha sees because of his attachment and grasping, which lead him towards erroneous views. First, the Buddha explains that there is no self involved in seeing. Ananda then tries the explanation that seeing simply arises, spontaneously and naturally. The Buddha shows that even this idea is wrong. Remember, we said previously that even nature and spontaneity are involved with self. Thus, Ananda has not totally understood the nature of the self.

This self is at base an illusion. To show this, the Buddha begins by asking Ananda to understand what happens when seeing takes place. Is there a self anywhere revealed when we see? The Buddha speaks of the conditions necessary for seeing. Light is one condition that must exist. But if there is light, there must be darkness, otherwise there would be no way to distinguish that something is illuminated – there would be nothing to illuminate if there were no darkness. Thus, if seeing arises because of a natural, spontaneous self, then light must be part of this self. And if light is a part of it, then darkness must be a part of this self, also. Then why is it that we can only see in the light, if darkness is part of the same self that is luminous, the same self from which seeing arises?

Space is also a condition for seeing. If there is something blocking your eye, or something right in front of your eye, then you won't be able to see. There must be a certain space in order for you to perceive something. If space is part of the natural, spontaneous self from which seeing arises, then obstruction must also be part of this self. Space can only exist

in conjunction with obstruction. Obstruction, which blocks space, must exist in space. Thus, both of these seeming opposites must also be part of the true, spontaneous self, if such a self truly exists.

Ananda thought about these principles and he agreed: there can only be seeing when there are opposites, light and darkness, space and obstruction. The totality must be present for seeing to occur. Thus, he began to understand that seeing does not arise from the self, nor does it simply arise spontaneously. He concludes that seeing must derive from causes and conditions; that is, the doctrine whereby any given phenomenon arises directly as a result of the influence of another phenomenon or phenomena.

But the Buddha does not accept causes and conditions as the reason for seeing. He explains that seeing does not exist because of light, darkness, space or obstruction. If seeing existed because of light, for example, darkness would not be seen. If it existed because of darkness, light would not be seen.

Trying to understand the nature of seeing through worldly knowledge, Ananda will forever be led astray. The Buddha compares this to trying to catch the void with your hand.

Buddhism does not speak of a true self, nor does it speak of natural, spontaneous arising, but it does speak of causes and conditions. Nevertheless, when Ananda said that it was causes and conditions that give rise to seeing, the Buddha still rejects the statement.



Ananda is somewhat puzzled by this. He asks the Buddha, *“World Honored One, if the nature of wonderful enlightenment has neither causes nor conditions, why has the Buddha always told us that the nature of seeing exists because of the four conditions of voidness, light, mind, and eye? What does all this mean?”*

The Buddha states that he spoke of worldly causes and conditions, which has nothing to do with supreme reality. He continues to question Ananda, and asks him what a worldly man takes seeing to be. Ananda replies, *“When a worldly man sees forms by the light of the sun, moon, or a lamp, he calls it seeing, but in the absence of such light, he cannot see anything.”*

The Buddha continues, and shows Ananda that though it may seem that seeing ceases in the absence of light, the nature of seeing does not cease for an instant, regardless of whether anything is actually perceived. Seeing, he tells Ananda, must be understood as it occurs through four states: light, darkness, the void, and obstruction.

Finally, the Buddha tells Ananda that when he clearly understands the seeing that is beyond seeing, his false ideas about the existence of self and the doctrine of causes and conditions will fall away.

Now I will speak of the essential difference between the worldly view of things and the Buddhadharma view, so that we may perhaps understand the difference between Ananda’s “seeing” and the Buddha’s “seeing.”



The typical Western worldly view is that if something is this, then it's not that. If it's not one, then it's two. There are, of course, concepts of combination: one and two, inner and outer, self and others, few and many. But these are not the concepts of Buddhadharma. In the view of Buddhadharma, any attachment to phenomena, views, or ideas is wrong, is inaccurate. Any idea of an original substance behind all phenomena or of true emptiness within emptiness is wrong. But sentient beings will always attach to something.

The Buddha sees this attachment of sentient beings and how it prevents them from attaining liberation. Therefore, he teaches that any attachment, even to something which is perceived as the truest or most correct, will block liberation. It is this attachment and the way to break it that the sutra addresses.

Let me return to the discussion of nature or spontaneity and causes and conditions. There was in ancient India a particular sect that believed that all things arise naturally or spontaneously. This is a belief that all things in the universe come into being not by the power of a god or the power of man, but by a natural power which exists in the universe in and of itself. All things come into being or pass away according to laws that accord with this power.

There's something to be said for this view. We know that no man or group of men have the power to cause all things in the universe to arise. And the average person, who normally does not interact directly with a god, necessarily finds it difficult to understand how another being could be able to



bring things into existence. Thus, it makes a certain amount of sense that things should arise naturally by a natural power, because people see the workings of nature all around them. This sect does not only teach materialism; its adherents recognize a spiritual side to life, too.

But there are problems with these views. If everything transpires according to natural law, then no god or any man has the power to influence the comings and goings of things. Those who adhere to this view would not pray. It would be totally useless. Self-cultivation, also, would be pointless. However, this sect does promote self-cultivation, but only to the end of coming to an understanding of and a merging with this natural power. Thus, in following these precepts, adherents seek to obtain freedom from the constraints of the material world. In point of fact, they see the material world as arising naturally and spontaneously, and it is by understanding the principles behind the material world, that they seek to transcend it.

The corresponding Chinese school of thought is Taoism, as it is set forth by Lao Tzu. Concisely put, Taoism holds that man lives on the earth, under the rules of the earth. The earth abides by the rules of heaven, and heaven follows the path or Tao of nature, or spontaneity. Ultimately, man must accord with the Tao.

In the I Ching, it says that the Tao is beyond the material world. The Tao itself is immaterial. But Lao Tzu took this idea one step further, and said that the spirit and the material can be united in accord with the Tao. Lao Tzu teaches



naturalness and spontaneity, but he does not teach of a god or gods. There is no personal god in Taoism, only a power or force that underlies and controls the universe.

There is an understanding in Taoism that when one extreme is reached, there is a movement back towards the other extreme. When the apogee of goodness is reached, then, there is a backsliding toward the negative, toward disintegration. When the utmost negative is reached, there is movement towards the positive.

This concept is related to the idea of yin and yang, and is somewhat different from the Indian school of thought. According to Taoism, good and bad are not separate. If you wish to reach the good, then place yourself in the bad. To get something, you need only discard it. There is a famous Taoist saying: “The more you get rid of, the more you have.” Thus, the more you help others, the more you help yourself. This is an interesting principle. Think about it. If you’re poor, and you give away what little you have, are you acquiring wealth? If you have one wife, does that you mean you could give her away, and still have a wife. This would be a misunderstanding of the concept. What is really meant here is that you have the perfect wife when you are unmarried, because the potential exists for any woman in the world to be your wife. If you are already married, then you already have a wife; all other women are excluded.

When you distill what Lao Tzu is saying, it comes down to a doctrine where there are no real opposites: no self and no other, no good and no bad. This comes pretty close to





Buddhism. What about self-cultivation? For Lao Tzu, according with the natural and spontaneous is cultivation. To do so is to be in accord with the Tao.

Lao Tzu describes the following as an ideal example of harmony with the Tao: There are two distinct villages, so close that when the dogs and chickens cry out in one village, they can be heard distinctly in the next. But no one in either village ever visits the other. They are true and integrated unto themselves. This is the best way for the world to be, in his view. With no interaction, there is no competition, no strife. Everyone lives out his or her life peacefully. What does it mean to be in accord with nature? To be aware of and in harmony with the earth, water, wind – all natural elements, and with all the animals and beings that live among these elements. To alter this state by human interference is to stray from the Tao. If I live on one bank of a river, and you live on the other, and I build a bridge so that we can meet, then I depart from natural purity. I have my water, you have yours. Why interact with each other? In this Taoist ideal, there is no vexation. You act only in accord with nature. There is no need to remove oneself to high in the mountains to undergo rigorous self-cultivation. All that is a waste of time. It only causes trouble.

In the sutra, Ananda is referring to the Indian school of naturalness and spontaneity, not Taoism.

Most people are willing to accept some of the principles of these schools of naturalness or spontaneity. Some aspects of these teachings are correct, and are easily followed.





However, these philosophies taken as a whole fall somewhat short, and the consequences of following them to the extreme would not be desirable. In India the natural philosophy was never dominant. In China, although there is much Taoist literature, few actually strived to achieve the ideal Taoist state. Few would go that far. The man on the street is not likely to follow these philosophies all the way to their logical end. Only a very philosophically minded person would try to totally integrate such views into his life.

Now, let's return to the teaching of causes and conditions. We said earlier that there is a difference between the worldly view and the Buddhadharma view of causes and conditions. Let's look at the example given in the sutra. The Buddha speaks of four conditions necessary for sight: light, space, an eye to see, and a form to be seen. And for the ear to hear? Well, there's no need for light, but there are still three conditions necessary: ear, space, and mind. And the sense of touch or sensations in the body? There must be body, mind, and a sense of feeling. For any phenomenon to be experienced there must be at least two conditions present.

However, if you think that reality can be experienced by virtue of the senses working through these conditions – the four for seeing, three for hearing, and so on – then there is a problem with your view of the self. We can understand what light is, what the eye is, what space is, but not what the mind is. Take seeing, for example. If you believe mind still exists when the other three conditions – eye, light, and space – are removed, then you are wrong. If you believe that there is no mind when these three conditions are removed, then you are



also wrong. The seemingly logical, worldly view of causes and conditions is not true Buddhadharma.

In Buddhadharma there is a saying: “Causes and conditions give rise to phenomena, but the base nature of all phenomena is empty.” It is the second part of this phrase that is important, that gives the essential difference between the worldly and the Buddhadharma view of causes and conditions. What is this emptiness? What does it mean? If you believe that it is the self, then that is wrong, of course. If you believe that emptiness is just emptiness – absolute nothingness, a state where there’s nothing there – then that is also wrong. We will touch on emptiness many times as we continue reading in the sutra.

## Individual and Collective Karma

June 15, 1986

In this passage of the sutra there are two basic issues – individual and collective karma, and the wrong views or delusions that generate and are generated by these two kinds of karma.

Some part of what you view the world to be is composed of those things unique to you as an individual. This affects your individual, specific karma.

Some part of your world view is composed of a common or collective perception. This affects common, or collective, karma. The common perception may simply relate to your family, your neighborhood, or the nation. Some part of the common perception may relate to all humanity at all times from the past to the future. Or a particular perception may relate to a certain point in time, in history.

Delusions that arise from individual karma are unique to that individual. Members of the same family in the same household view the same thing differently. The same person looking at the same thing at two different times may see two different things.

Once I was interviewed on WBAI. During the show, someone called in and asked about the threat of nuclear war. “Suppose,” he said, “someone in power decides to press the button?” “What would you do?” I said, “There’s no problem.

There is no one who is going to press the button yet.” This was sometime after the Central Park demonstration against nuclear weapons when some 100,000 people marched in protest.

I wanted to clarify my answer to the caller. Referring to the demonstration, I said, “These people might not accomplish what they want. It could very well be that one of the demonstrators now calling for an end to nuclear weapons might be the one who will later press the button.” The caller did not pursue the question, and the matter was dropped at that point.

During a lecture in Taiwan, I mentioned this incident. Someone in the audience thought it was strange to think that a protester against nuclear proliferation would become the one to start a nuclear war. I said, “There’s really nothing strange about it. In America people say, ‘I’ve changed my mind,’ all the time. And Americans are not the only ones. People all around the world constantly change their minds. It is not uncommon for someone to go from one end of the political spectrum to the other during his lifetime.”

Such changes as these arise from deluded views created by individual karma. These delusions create karmic seeds. Only one karmic seed can ripen at any one time. The ripening accords with the environment and historical and political circumstances. As the environment and the times change, different karmic seeds arise and manifest. This pattern of karmic ripening differs from individual to individual.



Individual karma, then, refers to a specific time and place and the views and circumstances that are unique to you and no one else. The time can be past, present, or future. The place can apply to your immediate environment, the human world, or that which is common to all sentient beings.

You may believe that the past has nothing to do with you, but it is precisely what you did in the past that has brought you to your present circumstances. What you did most in the past creates the seeds that ripen fastest. What you did somewhat less produces seeds that ripen more slowly. And what you did the least produces the seeds that ripen the slowest.

The illumination created by a lamp will serve as an analogy. A powerful lamp will cause you to perceive an object sharply and clearly. A less powerful lamp will give a less clearly defined impression of the same object. In the same way, what you did most in the past will have the greatest affect on your environment and the greatest influence on your perception. Those things that you did less frequently will have a weaker pull on your environment and perception.

Yesterday, I was talking with a few students about languages; one of them remarked that if you really master your own language, it will be easier for you to learn a second language. The reverse is also true. If you learn a second language your ability will also increase in the first. In fact, if you really concentrate in one particular area of study, you will see the benefits in whatever you do.

Someone who had studied Tibetan Buddhism for ten years





asked me if he could begin to study Chan. I said to him, “If you can temporarily put aside all of the conceptions you’ve acquired in pursuing Tibetan Buddhism, then when you practice Chan, all the power and benefits of your Tibetan practice will be transformed into energy that you can use in Chan. The effort you spent in studying Tibetan Buddhism will not be wasted. But you must put aside your conceptions. However, there is still the question of why you now consider Chan after so much work in Tibetan Buddhism. There may be no need to change. But if you are having particular difficulties that seem to be specific to Tibetan practice, then you may begin to study Chan.”

The power of what you did in the past will continue into the present and into the future according to the effort that you now expend. What you do now determines the effects or consequences of what you will experience in the future.

Such is the understanding of individual karma – specific acts in the present leading to specific results in the future. Delusions arise from this karma because of the constant change that occurs from past to present to future. Your perspective of events constantly changes. You constantly change your point of view. Your understanding varies from moment to moment. We call this constant change delusion. You may not notice the shift and alteration in perception, but, nonetheless, your views are in constant flux. Did you ever have the experience of believing that you had changed little, when you suddenly realized that you had actually changed quite a bit?



Thus far we have spoken of individual karma in the temporal sense – the way in which it changes through past, present, future. Now I will talk about the delusions that arise from individual karma in the spatial sense: how an individual can be influenced by his environment – family, nation or world.

The way an individual is influenced by what is around him depends on how wide or narrow his focus is. Someone who has cultivated a noble, generous character will move through the world with little concern for himself. He will see himself in relationship to the whole world. A selfish person will look no further than his own welfare. His relationship will only be with himself.

An individual's view of his place in the world determines how he feels about himself and everything that he sees and does. It is these very views and your actions based upon them that contribute to your individual karma.

Someone once came up to me and said, “Shifu, my life is really quite meaningless. I contribute nothing to the world. In fact, the world would be a better place if I wasn't in it. Things would be much simpler and much better if I died tomorrow.” This was his perspective on the world.

I asked him, “What about your family? Are you married? Do you have children?” And he said, “There's nobody left in my family but me. I never married and I have no children.” I said, “Why don't you get married. That may help your problem.” But he countered, “The woman I married would marry a nightmare. I would cause her nothing but problems.” I said,



“If you don’t want to get married, maybe you should adopt some children and take the responsibility for bringing them up.” But he replied, “How could a boob like me raise kids? I can’t take that kind of responsibility. I’m totally useless.” I said, “It’s exactly because you’re so useless, that you should try to assume some responsibility.”

Sometime later he came back. He looked good and he seemed healthy. “What happened? Do you feel useful?” I asked. “Well,” he said, “I don’t know how useful I am, but at least I’m planning to get married.” “Are you going to adopt?” I asked. “Well,” he said, “I figured that if I was going to get married, I might as well have kids of my own.”

Now he is the father of two children. I asked if he felt useful now. “Well,” he said, “I still consider myself to be a useless person, but I believe that my kids will grow up to be useful people.” “So do you still feel that the world can do without you?” I asked. And he said with no hesitation, “No way. I have to be here to take care of my children and help them to become really useful people.”

You can see how his perspective changed. He started out as an isolated individual. He was a pessimist. Now he’s married and a father. He’s no longer isolated, and he sees the world differently.

Here is a story along similar lines that involves the sangha. A monk I knew thought a great deal about leaving the monastery and taking up lay life again. He told his friends about his problem, and they decided to help him. They saw

to it that he got elected Secretary of the Chinese Buddhist Association. The position was important, and it necessitated attending numerous meetings and functions. He was eagerly sought after by a great many people, and he was kept busy all day. This continued for about five years. Then someone asked him if he still wished to return to lay life. He said, “Yes, I would prefer it. But before I became secretary, I was not a public person. No one knew who I was. Had I returned to householder life, no one would have cared. Now I have responsibility and a reputation. I’m known not only in Taiwan, but in other countries. If I left the monkhood and returned to lay life, it would be too embarrassing. I guess I’ll just have to accept my karma.”

This is another example of changed perspective – from the small focus of the individual to the larger focus of the community. The monk was at the point of forsaking his vows, but when he saw the larger picture, the idea dropped from his mind. I think it’s a good story.

Your responsibilities and the role you serve in the community determine how you see things and how you act in your everyday life. Someone I know in Taiwan, a genuine Buddhist practitioner, has become a minister in the government. Before he held office, he was a serious follower of the faith, and he always esteemed the Buddha and Buddhism exclusively. He had nothing to say about other religions. Once he became a government minister, however, he was aware of the sermons that were given in Christian churches, and he was invited to various ceremonies and functions that were either secular or involved other religions. In his speeches he had something

good to say about all religions.

There were monks, however, who accused him of betraying Buddhism. They asked why he was so magnanimous towards other religions. He said, “Personally, I’m still a Buddhist. But I represent the government now, and the government represents all the people, many of whom practice other religions. In my position I have to recognize the existence and merits of these other religions.”

There is a United States senator from Hawaii who will serve as another example of someone whose perspective has widened. Ethnically, he is Chinese, so when he visited Taiwan, local newspapers described him as Chinese. When he gave speeches, however, he always said, “I’m an American citizen.” But people in Taiwan asked, “How can you say that? You’re Chinese.” He said, “I’m an American citizen, and I’ve been elected by American citizens to represent them as their senator. Of course, my heritage is Chinese. My sisters came from China, and I will always have a deep affection for the country of my ancestors. But in my official position I have to concentrate all my efforts towards the benefit of the United States and her people.”

There is no confusion in what he is doing. There is nothing wrong with his values or judgment. This is the proper way to act. He may have Chinese blood, but in his official capacity he represents citizens of the United States.

Unfortunately one’s perspective doesn’t always widen to include the benefit of others. When individuals identify

themselves with the world in a particular way and exclude others from that identification, the results can be disastrous: Earlier this century in Germany, Hitler said that his was the master race. All others were inferior, less than human, and in following his perverted views, he tried to exterminate the Jewish people. During the same time in the Orient, the Japanese saw themselves as the direct descendants of heaven, and considered other peoples to be beneath them. They slaughtered thousands of Chinese with no compunction. These examples of enmity arose simply because of views of race. We certainly hope that such terrible events will not be repeated in the future.

Perhaps with this last example we are starting to enter the realm of collective karma – views and actions associated with a particular group which set that group apart from other collective entities.

The way an individual sees the world and the way a given group or community sees the world can be very different. The world as understood by the whole human race will be quite different from a given group or community. And the world we see is different from the world other sentient beings see.

Let's look at the karmic delusions that are common to the entire human race. Generally, we humans believe that it is wrong to eat other human beings. We don't know if such things actually occur, but the consensus among civilized people is that it is unconscionable. But eating animals is all right. They are not the same as us. They are a class below. Even in the animal rights movement, which seeks to save

animals from excessive cruelty, there are those that think it's permissible to eat animals. After all they are not human beings; they're animals. This is a value judgment.

Some people might ask, "If we don't eat animals, what could we eat?" Others might say that by eating animals, we can control their populations. Otherwise they might eat us. But if that were really true, people all over the world would be eating roaches, ants, and flies. These insects continue to reproduce and no one eats them. Nature has its own equilibrium; it takes care of overpopulation in its own way. Besides, most of the animals that humans eat are bred specifically for human consumption.

All of these delusions, individual or collective, never arise from underlying, unchanging criteria. These views and perspectives are in constant flux and are therefore illusory. What we call common, or collective, karma can pertain to things happening at the same time, to the same species or group, or within the same environment.

I recently read a story in the newspaper about a particular ethnic group in the Middle East. It was unclear whether this race still exists. These people bind the waists of their children at birth so that throughout their lives the waist never expands beyond that of a young child. In China well over 300 years ago the custom of binding the feet of young girls began. The toes were curled and fastened under the foot so that even as an adult a woman's foot would be no longer than three inches. Even though the practice was stopped long ago in China, there are still women living who have bound feet. I

recently met an old woman past eighty like this. In China in former times, a girl who had unbound feet was unacceptable, even to the point of being considered immoral. Among the group I spoke about in the Middle East, it was unthinkable not to have your waist tied.

From our point of view we see these customs as nothing less than torture, the deliberate crippling of human beings. It is a punishment that continues through a whole lifetime. At different times people see the same thing differently. But as you see in these last examples, at certain times in certain places, everybody sees things in a certain way. That is the common or collective perspective.

Recently a dance group from Africa went to Taiwan. The group also went to America and London. The women dancers danced bare-chested. In their native country this was considered a natural way to show the beauty of the body. In Europe and Taiwan, however, there was a problem. It was considered unacceptable and the dancers were banned from performing.

Not long ago some people in Taiwan wanted to start a nudist colony based on ideas they got from the West. This was a way they felt, of living in accord with nature. The government balked at this, however, and they were not allowed to proceed with their plans. The government said such actions were uncivilized.

Someone asked me what I thought of this movement. I asked, “You mean you want me to take off all of my clothes



and lecture here?”

You know, on the Mainland and in Japan there are public baths where men and women bathe together. I was once in a public bath in Hokkaido, when I realized there were women there. My first instinct was to get away from the place as fast as I could. Then I realized that such behavior would be inexplicable to my hosts, so I just stayed where I was. Personally, I saw no problem with this, but the general public would find it unacceptable. It is really a matter of consensus. If everyone undresses then that is the thing to do. However, in a situation such as this, I'm not going to be the first to take off my clothes.

The standards to which we try to conform, the criteria by which we judge others, and the views we have of the world are all products of the time and place in which we live. There are no real, unvarying principles behind these values and judgments. And it is because customs, standards, and views are constantly changing that we call them delusions. When the perspective derives from your specific past and life, then that is the delusion of individual karma. When the perspective is determined by a group of whatever size or an environment of any description, then that is the delusion of collective karma.

## Five Skandhas: False and Unreal

July 13, 1986

Today's passage from the sutra speaks about the five skandhas. Also known as the five aggregates, together they constitute what is commonly considered to be the self or ego. The five skandhas are form (rupa), sensation (vedana), perception or conception (sanjna), impulse, volition, or activation (samskara), and consciousness (vijnana).

There are many lines in this passage and the Buddha uses a number of analogies, but there is essentially one point. It is expressed in a single line of the *Heart Sutra*: the five skandhas and emptiness are one and the same.

Ordinary sentient beings take the five skandhas to be the self. Hinayana practitioners consider the five skandhas to be other than the self. Mahayana practitioners, however, are of the understanding that while it is true that the skandhas are not the self, it is equally true that the self cannot be separated from the skandhas. Thus in the Mahayana view, you cannot attain Buddhahood apart from the five skandhas. But the ordinary view is that Buddhahood is comprised of nothing but the five skandhas. The Mahayana practitioner, then, is neither attached to the idea of the five skandhas, nor would he or she be attached to the idea of their nonexistence.

According to the sutra, the five skandhas can be divided into the physical – the first skandha – and the mental – the remaining four.

An idealist who believes in the preeminence of the mental realm would concentrate on the last four skandhas. A materialist, who believes that all spiritual things are ultimately derived from matter, would concern himself solely with the first skandha. Buddhism recognizes both the physical and the mental realms, but the fact that four of the five skandhas are mind-oriented indicates the importance accorded the mental aspect. The world, the universe – all life – comes from this combination of matter and mind. Matter cannot exist apart from mind; mind cannot exist apart from matter.

Some may object to this view. We know that there are many, many, life forms on this planet, and perhaps some life forms on other planets in our solar system. One could make a case for a fair mixture of mind and matter in our immediate solar vicinity, so to speak. But in the far reaches of the universe where there seem to be great lifeless stretches of space, how can there be life there? How can we make such a comprehensive generalization that mind always exists with matter?

There is really no need to speak of other galaxies or other areas in the universe. Right here on our own planet, if we delve deep enough below the earth's surface, we can undoubtedly reach areas where there are no life forms. The same is true if we ascend high enough above the atmosphere.

Nonetheless, we often extract minerals or chemicals from deep inside the earth or the mountains, and even though these do not contain life in and of themselves, they relate – often directly – to our lives. We build buildings of stone. We

use oil to power our cars. The elements do affect us, and in many ways they are a part of us.

Let us return to the five skandhas. The first skandha, form, refers to all physical objects in whatever shape they may assume. Why do we use the word “form” to refer to all physical existence? In English, form refers to the shape of something, the way in which it occupies physical space. The term used in Chinese, “ssu,” is actually the word for color. This may seem a strange rendering for the concept of form, but it is probably a better choice than the English word, form, which is rather restricted in its meaning. “Color” as it is described in Chinese, denotes anything that can block the line of sight, and that cuts off the view of the eye. Only a physical entity can block the eye. Is there any physical entity that will not block the eye? The air or wind or any colorless gas might satisfy this criterion.

Form is further divided into “internal” and “external.” In both cases form is comprised of the four elements, earth, water, wind, and fire. These elements are directly affected by the forces of mind and karma. It is fairly easy to understand the workings of internal form. This is your own mind/body. If you consider some action or if karmic forces are such that you become ill, then the four elements within you move in a particular way. It is not hard to see that you are responsible for this movement. On the other hand, most of you would probably consider the external four elements to be nature, something totally unrelated to you. But this is really not the case. The movement of all external form occurs only as the result of the mental and karmic activity of all sentient beings

in this world. But since this external form is the product of the activity of all sentient beings, it may be difficult for an individual to see how he or she contributes to changes in the external four elements.

It is because of the great power that mental activity exerts on the body, mind, and the external world that Buddhadharma places such emphasis on the mind. Thus, as we said earlier, Buddhadharma assigns four of the five skandhas to the mental realm.

To the Hinayana practitioner the five skandhas are absolutely false. But the Mahayana practitioner, as it is shown in the *Shurangama Sutra*, understands that Buddha Nature – True Suchness – Tathagatagarbha – cannot be found outside of the five skandhas.

Tathagatagarbha is a mental, not a physical dharma. “Garbha” means a storehouse. What is it that it stores? True Suchness – the Buddha-mind. To discover this True Suchness, this Buddha-mind, and to transform the world of ordinary sentient beings into this true world, we must go further than the physical world. We must understand the Dharma of the mind.

Let us now turn to the mental skandhas. The sutra gives an analogy for each one of the skandhas, but I am not going to use these analogies. I will first explain what the five skandhas – the five aggregates – are, and then I will show how they are both false and at the same time how Buddha Nature – True Suchness – Tathagatagarbha is not separate from them.



After form, we have first sensation, that is, what we feel or sense; then perception or conception, the ideas we have and how we think and reason; then volition, impulse, or activation, the ideas of action or will that arise in the mind; and, finally, consciousness.

Note that the consciousness referred to here is the eighth (storehouse) consciousness (alaya-vijnana). After we perform an action, the consequences – the karma of that action – are planted in this eighth consciousness. The first four skandhas that we have spoken about, form, sensation, perception, and volition relate only to the first six consciousnesses. These are the consciousnesses that correspond to each of our five senses and the awareness that arises when one of these five senses comes into contact with a sense object. The awareness that results from this contact gives rise to the sixth consciousness.

You might wonder what happened to the seventh consciousness. This is the consciousness that contains the most profound sense of self. It interprets all phenomena that occur to you in such a way that a sense of self is established. This seventh consciousness takes the eighth consciousness to be the self. While we are alive, the first six consciousnesses continue to function. When we die, they disappear. But the eighth consciousness continues. This consciousness is the storehouse of all the karmic seeds we have accumulated through all of our previous actions. They are planted in the eighth consciousness by the self-conceiving function of the seventh consciousness.

The eighth consciousness is, in a sense, a lazy, easy-going,



overseer. It doesn't care whether you take something out or you put something in. But there is a very sharp, jealous gatekeeper guarding the storehouse. He holds on very tightly to everything in the storehouse as if it were his own self. This is how the seventh consciousness functions.

The eighth consciousness would be quite useless without the seventh consciousness. It would be nothing more than a receptacle to take things out of and to put things into. It is through the action of the seventh consciousness that our self-identified karmic seeds are stored, and we are kept moving from life to life in the realm of samsara.

Let us return to the second skandha, sensation. There are five kinds of sensations: suffering or pain, happiness, worry, joy, and a fifth which has the literal meaning of "dropping or casting off," and which amounts to something akin to indifference. Nevertheless, it, too, is a vexation.

When you are in the midst of suffering, no doubt you suffer. When you are in the midst of happiness, no doubt you are happy. But there are really no objective criteria for these perceptions. What may cause one person a great deal of pain may be perceived by another as an opportunity to grow. You could quite possibly be content in the midst of suffering. On the other hand, if you do certain things that you usually consider as pleasurable – drinking or smoking, let us say – to excess, then you may no longer regard these activities as agreeable. There is no objective way to measure these perceptions. How something is perceived depends on your state of mind.

For two people to live well together, it does not simply depend on shared activities or hobbies. What is important is a shared understanding and a common purpose in life. An initial perception of someone as attractive may wear thin after what you originally found attractive holds no interest for you, and there is nothing deeper to take its place. Many relationships fall apart for this reason. But with common meaning and common purpose, it is possible for two people to be quite content with their lives together.

Attitudes, perceptions, and feelings about people, places, and things are determined by subjective states of mind. There really are no objective criteria. Some people find pleasure in sadomasochism. Most people regard such behavior as strange and bizarre. But to the participants it is an acceptable way of relating. There are no standards of perception.

Now I will talk about the third skandha, conception, which contains our thoughts and ideas. These elements of ideation are constantly in a state of change. So long as they are in this state of flux, they have no real existence. Thoughts in our mind are like drops in a waterfall, changing, mixing, and separating in a rapid succession. The water-nature of the waterfall may not change, but the individual molecules of water move and change at rapid pace.

Our minds are just too dull to perceive this torrent of thoughts within ourselves. Only the grossest thoughts are perceptible. Subtle thoughts pass beneath our awareness. But no matter what thoughts pass through our mind, perceived or unperceived, they are all false. They have no real existence.





For the expedient purpose of Buddhadharma, especially for the beginner, there is the concept of right thought, to be distinguished from illusory thought. But at higher levels of practice, all thoughts, both “right” and “illusory” are discarded. The thought, “I want to attain Buddhahood,” may seem to be a noble thought, but it is nevertheless an illusion. With such a thought, you will never attain Buddhahood.

Such statements as “This is my idea,” “This is my conception,” “This is my philosophy,” are really hopeless illusions.

You may ask if it is proper for us to have our own opinions about the goings-on of the world. After all, we are still ordinary sentient beings, and we cannot dispense with our perceptions and conceptions.

The word conception also connotes dreams, wishes, imaginings, and illusions. We dream at night and we dream during the day. When we think, we believe that our thoughts are clear, but nonetheless, we are still dreaming. All thoughts, ideas, and conceptions that pass through our minds are dreams, and we will not awake to this understanding until we reach Buddhahood. There will then be no conceptions.

The fourth skandha is translated in a variety of ways: “volition,” “impulse,” or “activation.” Once ideas, thoughts, or conceptions have arisen in your mind, there is a tendency for you to have an impulse to actually do something, to perform some action. If, for example, you see a beautiful woman, and think, “I have to go after her,” and that is exactly what you do, then you are in the realm of the fourth



skandha. Note that no act can be performed without the idea of action first forming in the mind. That is why this skandha is classified as volition or activation. If you only think about doing something – if you only intend and do not act – then that is only in the realm of the third skandha, conception. Thoughts without action only generate minor karma. Only when mind, body, and speech combine in action is there absolute certainty that karmic seeds will be planted in your eighth consciousness.

It is important to understand that these occurrences of volition, impulse, and activation have no real existence in and of themselves because they are constantly moving, changing, and disappearing. These acts of will and their consequences may first seem to be truly awesome or terrifying: they determine whether we go to heaven or to hell. In heaven we enjoy the consequences of our actions. But this enjoyment is itself a kind of activation, and once the fruits of our previous good karma are exhausted, we might find ourselves cast down into the suffering of hell because of our previous bad karma. But what the *Shurangama Sutra* tells us is that, yes, we must be responsible for our actions, but there is no need to be afraid of them, because such fear generates attachment.

You must realize that once you practice to the point where you transcend the three realms of desire, form, and formlessness, and once you transcend birth and death and attain Buddhahood, there will be no volition, impulse, or activation for you. You may have to pay for past actions, but you will no longer create karma.

What is most important is to practice and continue practicing. Do not fear the bad karma of the past. There is no reason for you to think that there is no hope for you because of what you have done previously. Do not be concerned with the fact that even as you practice you simultaneously generate bad karma. There is no need to worry. Keep practicing.

We now come to the last skandha, consciousness. I have explained earlier that this is really the eighth consciousness, and that it is the storehouse for the karmic seeds planted by our perceptions, conceptions, and activations. But as I have shown, these perceptions, conceptions, and activations are themselves false and unreal, and thus the seeds that they generate have no real existence. The eighth consciousness, therefore, is really a storehouse of illusions. Nothing within it is real.

The storehouse itself is none other than True Suchness, Buddha Nature. It is itself Buddhahood. Does this mean that we have already attained Buddhahood? If in fact everything is an illusion, can't we assume that we have achieved all that there is to achieve and that we can do whatever we like? Can we not rob and kill with impunity? Are we not already Buddhas? Is this the point of the sutra?

No, the sutra sets forth a path for us; it does not give us license to do whatever we feel. We must try to free ourselves from illusions, to understand our own minds, and to progress ever higher in the practice. We must be responsible for our actions. We must keep the precepts. We must practice samadhi to attain wisdom, and we must achieve purity

of mind. Tathagatagarbha will then be the same as True Suchness. But until we reach the point where our mind is truly undefiled, our Tathagatagarbha will continue to store the karmic seeds of our actions, and we will continue to bear the responsibility for this karma; and we will continue to have perceptions that are rooted in illusion: of happiness, joy, love, hatred, worry, indifference

## **The First of the Six Sense Organs & the Eyes**

November 2, 1986 & November 9, 1986

In previous chapters of the sutra the Buddha has spoken about the five skandhas, or aggregates. He has shown that these skandhas have no real existence, yet they are not separate from reality.

From the third chapter onward, the Buddha begins to talk about the six entries, the twelve positions, and the eighteen realms. These comprise the material and mental worlds. The Buddha addresses the question of whether or not these worlds have real existence.

The six entries are sometimes called the six sense organs or the six kinds of sense organ roots. The six entries are the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind. Why are they called entries? It is because these sense organs are the source of all of our problems. If these sense organs were closed, we would have no problems. As long as we have a body, we have these six sense organs, and as long as we have them, we have problems. Problems lead to vexation; vexation leads to suffering. All sentient beings wish to be free from suffering.

Why don't we just get rid of our sense organs, if they are the source of our problems? Wouldn't this make sense? Of course not. We cannot remove our senses, but we must use our eyes, our ears, and all of our six sense organs in the right way, the proper way. They will still be entries, but



they should cease to be entries of vexation so that they will become entries of wisdom. They should no longer be entries of evil karma, but rather entries of merit and virtue. If we can bring this about, we will continue to use our sense organs, but we will turn away from the path of vexation and onto the path of practice. You can change your suffering and turn it into great merit and wisdom.

Thus the sutras say, “If your sense organs are not pure, vexations will arise.” Put in another way: “If you have vexations, it is because your sense organs are not pure. They are defiled.” When your sense organs are pure and undefiled, liberation will follow. When your sense organs are impure, vexations arise. To purify and clean your sense organs is to reduce your vexations.

If there is someone you hate or with whom you’re angry, ask yourself, “What is it about this person that I don’t like?” Can the problem be reduced to a particular sense organ or a combination of sense organs? Is it the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind, or all of them together? Few people would cause distress to all of your six sense organs. Vexation in only two or three of the entries will be sufficiently annoying.

At the end of a retreat sometime ago in Taiwan, someone came up to me and told me that the retreat had been very helpful. “But,” he said, “I hope with all my heart that Mr. So-And-So and I will never be together on the same retreat again. Next time he comes, I’m staying home.”



I said, “You must have a long-standing feud with him. What was it he did to you that brings out such great resentment?”

He said, “This was the first time I ever laid eyes on him. He never did anything to me. It’s just that I had the misfortune to sit next to him and sleep near him. During the day his body odor drove me crazy. At night his snoring kept me awake.”

These vexations came in through the nose and the ears.

How is the problem of the six entries approached in Chan? There are successive stages that you must pass through. First, you must learn to close all of your sense organs. Later, you will be able to open your sense organs, but at this stage they will no longer be used to make differentiations or distinctions. The six sense organs will receive everything and yet remain undefiled. Only when you have reached this point are the six sense organs considered to be completely pure.

How can we close the sense organs? Suppose you see a beautiful woman or an attractive man, and suppose that this sight creates vexations in you. Simply close your eyes for a moment. Or if there are places where very attractive people congregate and this distracts you, simply avoid those places if you can. If you don’t let your eye be defiled, that will lead to cleanliness and purity.

We are often misled by our eyes. For example, when we eat, we only want to eat very clean food. We don’t want to touch food that has fallen on the ground; we look at it and call it

dirty. But if you really think about all the processes that the food we eat goes through and all the hands that touch it, you will see that it is not very different from food that has fallen on the ground. Because you don't see all the places that your food has been before you eat and all of the things that are really on it, you think it's clean. What you don't see, taste, touch, feel or think will not affect the cleanliness or purity of your sense organs.

The eye and the ear are the worst offenders. Taste and smell do not really bring much trouble. But there is the problem of the mind. If a thought or an idea makes you unhappy, it is best not to dwell on it. If your mind is too active, one statement by another person will cause you to jump to conclusions and will create trouble. However, if you don't let yourself understand the implications of what's being said, or if you consider the other person's perspective, you will not be bothered.

There are too many things in this world that cause suffering through the eye and the ear. We can reduce these vexations of the entries to sense organs by not allowing the mind to dwell on what is seen or heard.

Eventually, your practice will reach a point where you can keep your sense organs open. You will then look at everything without seeing anything; listen to everything and hear nothing. Perhaps this is not the best way of putting it. Although you see everything, it is really your eyes that see, it is not you. It is your ears that hear sound; it is not you. Each sense organ has sensations, but they have nothing to do with



you. Your sense organs still function perfectly. If someone slaps you, you recognize that you are being slapped. You have a sensation that something is hitting something, but you are not being hit. In fact, whatever happens will have nothing to do with you.

Patrick, how would it be if you came up here and I slapped you? Would you just say, “No, that wasn’t me who was hit”? You don’t understand? Well, in that case there’s no need for you to come up.

The important thing is your mental state. If someone slaps you and you slap him back, but there is no disturbance in your mind, then you haven’t been hit and you haven’t hit anyone. If someone slaps you and you immediately become upset and angry and hit back, then you have been hit and you have hit someone else.

Now I will talk about each of the six entries, beginning with the eyes. The sutra says that there is no such thing as seeing. Ordinary people believe what they see is real. They associate seeing with what is seen or with that which sees, and they take this to be real. If they see something they perceive as beautiful, they will want to look again. They will turn away from something ugly. But the *Shurangama Sutra* states that there is no such thing as seeing.

You may believe what you see is real, but when you are tired, or if you stare at a certain point for a long period of time, your eyes tire and you may begin to see things. Your eyes see what really isn’t there. Ordinary people will admit that what



they see under these circumstances is probably unreal. But if they are awake, they take what is seen to be real. The sutra shows that what is seen brings forth innumerable feelings and emotions: anger, happiness, sadness, joy. Your mind is directly affected by what you see. You may think what you see is real, but your sight is really no different from that of a person with tired eyes.

For example, you may dislike people with round faces. Someone else may dislike people with long faces. Most people cannot give coherent reasons for their likes and dislikes. Impressions come from books, discussions, common prejudice, your imagination, and likes and dislikes are slowly built. There is nothing rational about the process. No one decides, “Yes, logic shows that round faces are all bad,” or “I have determined that long faces are unpleasant.” Rather, there seems to be an intrinsic affection or disaffection for such characteristics.

To have such built-in bias means that your eyes do not function well. They are starry and hazy. This does not happen over night. We are born with hazy, clouded eyes. Only when you are enlightened do your eyes function clearly. The sutra says that our eyes are tired. And because we are tired and have vexations, we cannot see our own nature clearly. This is not true seeing.

The sutra explains that there must be three components present in order for us to see: the dual conditions of light and darkness, the sense organ of the eye, and space. Without any one of these three, seeing does not occur. The first component





of seeing is the condition of light and darkness. We cannot see without light, but without darkness – something to obstruct light – we cannot see either. Light and darkness must coexist in order for seeing to occur. The problem is that light and darkness are intrinsically opposites. How can they exist together?

According to the sutra, we cannot hold onto the idea that it is light and darkness that allows us to see. We must understand that the kind of seeing that common sense refers to is really the seeing of hazy eyes. The sutra explains that we live in an illusory state. Because of our vexations we don't see things as they really are. Note that the sutra doesn't speak against common sense or the phenomenal world, nor does it object to our impression of light and darkness. The sutra simply points out that if we try to hold onto what we see as real, this can lead to vexation.

The second component of seeing is the eye. The eye alone is not sufficient to enable us to see. In a dark room, for example, what do we see? We may say that we see “black,” but that is only because we have a memory of light; it is not really what we see at that moment. It is just another illusion.

The third component of seeing is spatial relationship. Common sense tells us that we need space between objects and in front of our eyes in order to see. But this, also, does not hold true. For example, I'm short-sighted and must wear glasses. In order to read I must hold a book at a certain distance. If I take off my glasses, I have to bring it closer to my eyes. Because of these different spatial relationships I



can see. Without space it is not possible to see, and yet again, this doesn't mean that with space we can see.

Thus our seeing is erected upon a foundation of illusions. What we see is at best a distortion. So we should not be too attached to anything we see. Our eyes are the primary source of all our vexations.

We apply inconsistent criteria to what we see and what we consider beautiful. The French sculptor Rodin, for instance, created a famous statue called "The Thinker." It is widely praised by art critics. In China there is a set of statues of four Vajra Kings with bulging muscles that is considered a masterpiece. In some African cultures, woodcarvings represent women with long, slender upper bodies, big bellies and short legs, and these are considered by the native populations to be ideals of beauty. What are the true, unchanging criteria of beauty? These criteria are manmade, human, and variable. There are no absolute standards.

We usually talk about truth, good, and beauty as if they really exist. Truth belongs to philosophy, virtue to religion – at least worldly religion – and beauty to art. Buddhism is not against truth, good or beauty. But there is a need to be free from attachments to these concepts. In a state of liberation it is irrelevant to speak of things as true or not true, virtuous or not virtuous, beautiful or not beautiful.

If we see, and yet it is as if we haven't seen at all, this is true seeing. It is only this state that is in accord with the true nature of the Tathagatagarbha. In it we see everything,

and yet there is no emotional response of love or hatred, or discrimination into beauty or ugliness. There are no distinctions; everything is seen as equal. This is the True Suchness of the Tathagatagarbha, which is also called the purity of the sense organ of the eye.

Thus, if you see things that you particularly don't like, or people you particularly dislike, or if you see things or people that particularly interest you, then how pure and undefiled are your eyes? If we have not reached the point where the sense organ of the eye is pure, then what we see can lead to vexation. We must then use the teachings of the sutra to help us overcome our attachments. We can use the dialectic of the sutra to remind ourselves that whatever we see (the combination of light and darkness, the organ of sight, and the spatial relationship) is illusory. There is ultimately no reason to be attached to what we see.

About a year ago a college girl came to see me for advice on a personal matter. She had seen a man at a party and couldn't get him out of her mind. Her friends arranged a meeting with him. They became friends, but he showed no particular interest in her. She was upset, yet she was too shy to take the initiative. She asked me if there might be some karmic affinity because she was obsessed by him. I said, "If there were really some close affinity from a previous life, then the first time he saw you he should have felt the same way you felt. But if only you felt it and he didn't, then it seems like it is nothing more than your own karmic vexation." She asked me what to do, because she was having trouble concentrating on her studies. She was doing poorly in school, and she

couldn't find any meaning in life. What would you tell her?

I told her to try to concentrate on her schoolwork and nothing else. If that didn't work, I told her she should ask herself, "What did I see? What was it that made me feel this way?" She must realize that what she is seeing is just a false image; it is not the true person. But she objected, "What I saw was a real person."

I said, "Well, you were in an emotional state; this guy happened to be around and your karmic obstruction manifested in him. You should try to see him clearly; what he really is might not be worth spending so much time and emotion on." Then she said, "It makes sense but I still can't get rid of this feeling I have for him. What should I do?" "In that case," I replied, "don't be so shy. Just go up to him and ask, 'Do you love me or not?'" She said, "If I do that, he may look down on me and refuse to have anything more to do with me." I said, "Well, that's the best solution I have to offer."

Any problems you might have – just come to me. I have plenty of solutions like this. But you'll do better to practice. This will be the best solution.



## **The Sense Organs of Hearing and Smelling**

November 16, 1986

I will continue talking about the senses and sense organs as they are discussed in the sutra. Today we will cover hearing and smelling, and show that fundamentally, as we saw with the sense of seeing, there is no substance to these senses. They do not exist in the way that we believe them to exist.

The Buddha tells us that hearing itself is the same as True Suchness. True Suchness is motionless. It makes no distinctions and contains no vexations. Once the mind moves, there is vexation. Vexation is really neither within nor without. It is nothing more than illusion. The sutra arrives at this conclusion through a careful analysis of the phenomenon of hearing.

Three elements must exist for hearing to occur: first, the contrast of stillness and motion; second, the sense organ of hearing (the ear); and third, the space through which sound is transmitted. When there is contact with the ear, hearing occurs, but this hearing has no real existence – it is fleeting and transitory. Hence we say that it is illusory.

We usually hear sound from outside, but sound may arise from within as well. Some people experience this as a ringing in the ears. Those of you who are older may have had this experience. It is simply a physiological response of the body, unconnected to the outside world.



When I was in Japan, I went to visit an old monk. After we talked for about half an hour, the old reverend said, “My ears told me not to speak anymore.” I asked what he meant. He said, “My ears ring when I’ve said enough. I should be quiet now and rest.” But I wondered why I heard nothing. I had not yet heard of [the condition of] ringing in the ears.

Someone just mentioned to me that long exposure to loud rock and roll can produce a similar effect. I am sure this can be true. Loud noises can damage the ear.

Sound does not simply have to be loud enough to cause damage. Sound can create an enduring effect on the emotions. There’s a Chinese saying that after you have listened to a beautiful concert, you will continue to hear lovely music reverberating in the concert hall long after the musicians have left. Literally, “the sound circles the pillars for three days.”

Your response to sound may be connected to your own attachment or preference to a particular voice or kind of sound. Sometimes you may simply be impressed or moved by the sound of someone’s voice, rather than by the content of what he or she says. You may hear the voice linger for days. A left-home disciple of mine has a very pleasant voice. Some people go to the temple just to hear the sound of his voice. When they look at him they think, “Gee, he doesn’t look like much, but what a great voice he has!”

A deep impression of and preoccupation with the sound of someone’s voice can be a source of vexation. The ear can



produce sensations and illusions in other ways. There is an exercise that Chinese Taoists do 36 times in the morning and 36 times at night. It's called "beating the heavenly drums." You put your thumbs over your earlobes and tap the top of your head lightly with your fingers. If you knock too hard, you can become dizzy. It is done to clear the head and calm the mind. Because it is done with the ears closed, the tapping may seem to produce quite a loud noise. But if you try it without closing your ears, you will see that there is really not much sound produced. Another Taoist exercise is to place your little finger in your ear (not your thumb this time) and gently shake it. This can produce a feeling of well-being. These last examples demonstrate how a variety of stimuli to the ear can produce illusory perceptions or feelings.

When you sit in meditation, not in a deep state of samadhi, but nevertheless with few wandering thoughts, it is quite likely that you will hear sounds you do not ordinarily hear. Once again, these are illusory perceptions of the ear. Most people realize that what they hear under circumstances like these is not real. But almost everyone believes that what they hear under normal circumstances is absolutely real.

Let's return to the *Shurangama Sutra* and the basic issue of sound – is it real or not? Common-sense says that sound is real, but the sutra shows that sound has no real existence and is therefore illusory.

The first element of hearing is the contrast of motion and stillness. That is, the ear must be sufficiently still or calm to perceive sound. The ear will then be able to pick up movement

in the air. If there were nothing but stillness, nothing would be heard. If there were nothing but movement, sound could not be distinguished. Thus there must be both stillness and motion for hearing to occur.

At lunch, Ming Yee sat beside me, but he complained that he was unable to hear what I said. He found this very frustrating and wondered if he was getting old before his time. Now, in the lecture, Paul, who is sitting at the other end of the hall from me, has no trouble hearing what I say. It is quiet now, and there are few distractions. At lunch, there was a crowd of voices each one interfering with the other. Ming Yee's ears were not still enough or perhaps sharp enough to overcome the interference. Right now he is not having any trouble hearing me.

The *Shurangama Sutra* states that stillness and motion are basically contradictory states; they cannot coexist. When there is stillness there cannot be motion. When there is motion there can be no stillness. It does not really follow, then, that we can hear because of the coexistence of stillness and motion, since they are mutually contradictory. Some of you might object to this and say that that which is in a state of motion is in fact the sound, and it is the ears that are in a state of stillness. But if the ears were really still, they would not be able to be affected by sound. The ears would remain still and no hearing would occur. Thus it must be that our ears move with the sound. And if sound is motion and our ears are in motion, then what our ears experience is a chaotic array of changing impressions – this is what we call hearing. What we hear most of the time when we think we are really

hearing is illusory.

Only a flat, flawless mirror reflects clearly. Only the calm, smooth surface of water will show a clear image of what is above the surface. It follows that the ear, when in motion, will imprecisely render what is to be heard. If you argue that hearing comes only from the sense organ of the ear, ponder the fact that a dead person may have the tissue of the ear intact, but a dead person cannot hear anything. You believe that hearing comes from space, because the sound that we hear is transmitted through space. But space is space because it's empty, because it's void. It cannot have any function. How can it store sound?

If we analyze the three elements necessary for hearing, motion and stillness, the ear, and space, in view of what was said above, we can conclude that sound or the phenomenon of hearing cannot be found in any one of these elements separately. Now, the question is, can we say that sound or hearing exists in the three when they are united together?

Common-sense tells us that stillness and motion, the ear, and space must be present for hearing to occur. The sutra does not deny this, but this is not the issue. The important question is: from whence does hearing arise? If we say it comes from the three elements, we will not be able to pinpoint it. We will not be able to find any place to which hearing belongs. We must then conclude that hearing does not exist as we believe it to exist. It is illusory. There really is no such thing as hearing.

The underlying principle here is that all dharmas arising

from causes and conditions have no self-nature and are empty. They are without real existence.

The other day I was out walking with Guo Yuan Shih, and we saw a shop called Illusion Video. Guo Yuan Shih mused whether the owner of the store was enlightened because he realized that all things are illusions. Whatever appears on the TV screen is a product of electronic signals stored on magnetic video tape. These are only images, appearances. There is no substance behind them. Even the stories on which films are based are made-up. What videos really show is one illusion piled upon another.

Do not get caught up in the sound of things. You should not take what you hear to be absolutely real whether it is sound or speech, good or bad, pleasing or distasteful. Do not be attached to these sounds. In this way you will avoid vexations.

Here is a sad story that illustrates the extent to which hearing can cause suffering. In Taiwan there's a drawing called the "Patriotic Lottery." Twenty years ago the first prize was equivalent to \$5,000. That was a lot of money in Taiwan at that time. There was a man who made it his habit to buy a ticket every time the lottery was run. He told his whole family what numbers he picked so that they could follow along when the winning numbers were chosen. On one particular night the son ran up to his father and told him he had won the lottery. The father said, "Really?" The son said, "I heard it over the radio." The father was ecstatic, "I won the lottery. I won the lottery." Suddenly he collapsed and

fell into a coma. He had had a heart attack. He went to the hospital and died there. The next day the family checked the newspaper again and realized that the father had not won. He was one number off. The son had misheard the radio. A problem with hearing caused his father's death. Even very simple sounds can lead to tremendous vexations.

All of our senses can be misleading. Something may make us happy for the moment, but it is doubtful that the happiness will last. There is no lasting, permanent happiness. At least the man in this story died happy. He thought that he was a rich man. Maybe he realized his folly later.

In the same way that the elements of hearing were analyzed, the *Shurangama Sutra* analyzes the elements of smelling. There must exist a contrast between penetration and obstruction, the sense organ of smelling (the nose), and space. Of these three elements, only the element of penetration and obstruction is different from that of hearing. Thus penetration and obstruction parallel motion and stillness. To understand the idea of penetration and obstruction imagine your nose had no end to it and was just a tube open at both ends. Air would just flow right through and there would be no way to smell anything. So there must be obstruction present. If, on the other hand, there were only obstruction, and your nose was a tube closed at both ends, no smelling would take place either. Of course penetration and obstruction cannot coexist simultaneously. Like hearing, then, smelling is an ever-changing array of elements that is at base without substance.

And as with hearing, it is our minds that really create what

we smell. You may think that a beautiful aroma is pleasant or that a great stink is a horror to endure, but people do get used to smells. There is a Chinese saying that: “If you stay in a greenhouse long enough, the flowers lose their fragrance.” By the same token, if you work in a fish market long enough, even the smell of abalone (known for its evil smell) would cease to annoy you. It is the distinctions made in our minds that lead to vexation.

It is not our sense organs which are important, but our attitude, the posture of the mind towards what we encounter in our lives. Last Thursday a woman came to me and told me of the hardships she had been through. She told me how she came to this country and how she struggled to make a living working in restaurants under exceedingly harsh conditions. She was exploited by the people she worked for, and she lived like this for five years. She told me she had no idea how she had lived through the hard times. I said, “You simply got used to the difficulty and the time went by.” The woman said, “I’m not sure I could go through this again.” “If you really had to, you would,” I said. I told her that human beings are born into this world to suffer. People who suffer and don’t realize they are suffering are foolish. The wise know they suffer, when they suffer. The woman thought that maybe the rich do not really suffer. They live the good life.

And I said, “That’s not right, either. I know a wealthy lady whose son is grown and successful, but every time she talks to me all she does is complain about her problems.” The woman then asked me, “If the rich have so many problems, why bother being rich?” I said, “Poverty doesn’t

ensure happiness, either. The amount of money you have doesn't determine how many problems you have. With Buddhadharma as your foundation, you can be happy if you're poor or happy if you're rich. There's nothing wrong with being rich and there's nothing wrong with being poor. What is important is your approach to life."

Someone once said to me, "Shifu, you're really very lucky. You have no children. You have no family. You don't have to worry about a career. You're a left-home person, and so you have no vexations." I replied, "Children, family, career have nothing to do with it. I don't have children, but I have disciples whom I must help. I have no family, but I have temples to lead. I have no career, but I work hard spreading the Dharma, sometimes to the point of exhaustion, yet I have little vexation." Having no responsibility does not prevent vexation. On the other hand, taking responsibility does not automatically create vexation. It depends on your attitude and your approach to life. If you approach your responsibilities simply as things to do, and do not attach to hope of success or fear of failure, you will find that your vexations will be few.

## **The Sense Organs of Tongue and Body**

November 23, 1986

Ananda continues questioning the Buddha on various sense organs. In today's passage he inquires about the functions of the tongue and the body. The Buddha continues with the same dialectic he has used with all the senses. This consists of seeking and then refuting the origin and existence of each sense. In the case of taste, he first uses the example of a man licking his lips. According to his state of health or sickness, he will experience either a sweet or a bitter taste. The Buddha shows that these tastes are but illusions. They have no origin; they cannot be traced back to the flavor of things, nor to the tongue or to the void. The entrance of the tongue is therefore unreal. It is neither causal, nor conditional, nor self-existent.

The Buddha shows that while there is no reality to the sense of taste, this sense is nevertheless identical to the True Suchness of the Buddha, which is unmoving, all-abiding, and empty. All phenomena are involved in emptiness. The characteristic of taste is also emptiness in the sense that when we taste something, what we think we taste is an illusion.

How was lunch today? Some of you seemed to like the dish with peanuts; some the dish with the pancakes and potatoes; some of you liked all of the dishes. But can you still taste the food? No. If the taste is no longer with you, how do you know that you liked it? Sheila? She says she liked it at the time.



What taste we sense, we sense in a given moment. Some people prefer sweet, some sour, some salty, some hot and spicy. Is one taste better or more correct than another? Different people experience different tastes. Even the same person can sense different taste in the same food at different time. When you get up in the morning, before you've brushed your teeth, does food taste as good? If you're running a high fever, will food seem particularly tasty to you? With a stomach problem or white spots on your tongue, will you find anything appetizing?

Different conditions change the way food tastes. Taste is subjective. This means that you can exert influence over the way something tastes. Even the same food may taste different to you at different times.

Imagine eating the food fed to chickens, ducks, cattle, pigs, or dogs. You would probably find it repulsive. It is not suitable for us. There is a story, however, of some Taiwanese during World War II who were conscripted into hard labor by the Japanese Army. The Japanese, of course, ate well; the Taiwanese laborers fared very poorly. One laborer in particular worked for a very well-fed general. Even the general's horse was well-fed. When the Taiwanese felt hungry, he would take the horse's fodder. The horse ate better than he did. Here is another instance of how desire for food can change with circumstances. Under normal conditions, no one would want to eat horse feed.

I still remember the end of World War II, when China was in short supply of food. One day a large supply of American

canned goods came onto the market. People swarmed to acquire the modestly-priced, tasty food. Of course few could read English. Only later did they find out that they were eating U.S. Army dog food.

Let's take another perspective. Don't you think for the deities in heaven what we eat is equivalent to animal fodder? Don't you think that they would find it unacceptable?

Before every meal in the temple, an offering is made to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. This is a heavenly meal, yet it is food we eat ourselves. Couldn't we do better than offer to the heavenly deities what is probably no better to them than dog food?

Avy says that what we offer is good enough for the deities, even though it may be little better than swill to them. What she said is partially correct. But there is more to it than that. For great practitioners there is nothing that is inedible or distasteful.

Not long ago there was a famous Chinese Buddhist Master named Hung-i who was known for his strict adherence to the precepts and his practice of samadhi. He lived during a time and in a place where material things were scarce. The quality of the food was particularly poor. People usually offered him just rice, dried turnips, or some salty, watery soup. On special occasions he might be offered a few pieces of bean curd. But no matter what the master was presented with, he seemed to be quite happy, and he thoroughly enjoyed his food. His disciples wondered aloud to him: "Master, we know this food

is pretty awful. How do you find it so delicious?” The master would hear none of it. “No, this food is quite wonderful,” he would say. “Food for the gods could be no better.”

I had a similar experience when I practiced alone in the mountains. My diet consisted solely of wild potato leaves, except for the few times I would be offered bean curd by monks from a nearby temple. Somehow I was quite content. Even now I think of wild potato leaves as some of the best food I have ever eaten.

The great practitioners, Bodhisattvas or Buddhas, do not consider the food we eat to be comparable to dog food. They do not react the same way we do when we see animals eating their feed. Great practitioners do not make such distinctions. Heavenly beings, on the other hand, can have feelings of disgust. How do you think we would react to the food that heavenly beings eat?

People who practice particularly well and are in good mental and physical condition may find the food they eat much tastier than usual. At a retreat in Bodhi House one of the participants had a few good sittings and afterwards commented that the food at the retreat was the best he had ever eaten. This is nothing other than an offer by heavenly beings.

The question is: is this experience real or not? Since the sense of taste changes according to physical, mental, or psychic conditions, it is not real. Only that which is permanent and unchanging is real in Chan. The taste of something would

only be real if it never changed for you. Even when we sit and practice well, the sense of taste we get is illusory. There are some who only think about the taste of good food when they sit. This is an attachment. If you don't watch out and you continue to dwell on food, you may be born in the realm of hungry ghosts.

Let us return to the text. The sutra distinguishes between different tastes: bitter, sweet, sour, etc. These tastes are determined by the motion and stillness of the body. If you are sick or tired, you might experience a bitter taste in your mouth. When you are active and healthy, you are more apt to experience sweetness. When you are very still, you may experience no taste at all. The sutra shows that both of the states of motion and stillness comprise one of the three elements of the sense of taste. The other two elements are the sense organ of the tongue and the void.

Again, the sutra uses the same dialectic here as for the other senses. If we analyze these three elements separately, we see that no one element gives independent rise to the sense of taste. Most of us would say, however, that taste comes from the combination of these elements. But this is not really true.

Let me ask you a question. Consider the tongue with its sense of taste and the ear with its sense of hearing. Which gives rise to more attachment? Which gives rise to more thoughts of like and dislike, happiness and unhappiness, and thus more vexation? Which causes more disturbances in the mind?

The problems caused by the tongue are nothing compared to the problems caused by the ear. A random sound, a disturbing sound, the sound of scolding or criticism – all give rise to vexation. What about pleasant sounds? Praise, for example? These are no different from unpleasant sounds. All give rise to vexation.

The desires that arise in sentient beings derive directly from the senses. Sentient beings seek after form, sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. They pursue satisfaction and they are never satisfied. Most sentient beings are like someone trying to lick honey from the sharp end of a knife. A skillful person will turn the knife around and lick from the blunt end. A greedy person will cut off his tongue. Thus if you are never satisfied, you reach a point where you do harm to yourself.

The five senses must be approached in this way: see phenomena as unreal, but act as if they are real. You must lick the honey – you must sustain yourself – otherwise you will die of starvation. But always be content and do not form attachments. To view the world as unreal and avoid attachment, and yet act as if everything is real and fulfill all responsibilities – this will achieve a balance that is safe and free from vexation.

It is quite common for couples to quarrel. If your partner accuses you of any number of outlandish things and acts irrationally, you can still be rational and reasonable. If the other person acts unreasonably, that's his or her business. You should be clear-sighted and fair, despite the other person's behavior. All couples quarrel sometime otherwise they

wouldn't be couples. Who knows? Maybe even heavenly beings quarrel with one another.

The next passage from the sutra deals with the sense of touch. The sense organ of touch is the body itself. Touch involves sensations of warmth, cold, roughness, smoothness, softness, and hardness. The sutra applies the same dialectic we have seen before to the sense of touch. The elements that comprise touch are separation and contact, feelings of pleasantness and unpleasantness, the body, and the void. You must have separation followed by contact, or vice versa, to have a sense of touching something. Second, what you have touched will appear either pleasant or unpleasant to you. How does the void figure in? If you analyze each of the elements of contact and separation or pleasantness and unpleasantness, you will see that nowhere will you find the sense of touch in and of itself. You might think touch can be traced back to the void, but this does not hold because how can you touch the void?

Finally, the body itself is an element in the sense of touch, but the body, with no object to touch, cannot produce this sense alone. Following the thread of this argument, you will see that all sensations – hot, cold, smooth, rough, hard, soft, are illusory. They have no permanent reality. Thus the sutra tells us that there is really no such thing as the sense of touch. This sense exists in the world of common sense, but it has no intrinsic, unchanging existence.

During the last year or so in Taiwan, I have been speaking on the *Diamond Sutra*. There is a particular woman who comes to the temple every Sunday from a great distance just to hear

my lecture. She travels more than an hour and a half each way. Her husband has been unhappy about her regular attendance at the temple. He asked her, “What is so wonderful about that place? Is the travel really worth it? Why do you want to hear some monk speaking?” One day she came home and her husband screamed at her. The wife paid no attention. She told him, “From listening to the *Diamond Sutra*, I realize that the ear is unreal, and so is your voice. It’s an unreal voice striking an unreal ear.” The husband was taken aback.

But the next Sunday the same thing happened. The wife said, “It may happen that you will scream at me every time I come back from the temple, but it will not bother me. If it did, then all of my trips to hear the sutra would be wasted.” The husband objected, “If everything is unreal, if everything is only an illusion, then the husband and wife relationship is also an illusion.” The wife replied, “Of course it’s not real.” “In that case,” the husband said, “we should separate.” But his wife replied, “We have children and we’ve been together a long time. We should continue. The relationship may be unreal, but we have parts to play as if we were on a stage, and they are important. We should act in this play as if it were real.” The husband was impressed. His wife seemed to have changed indeed. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised to see the husband at the Sunday lecture when I go back to Taiwan.

So what do you do if your spouse gives you a hard time, if he or she is particularly unpleasant or quarrelsome? This is a good opportunity to meditate on the *Shurangama Sutra*. In providing you with this occasion to practice and to meditate on the sutra, your spouse is following the Bodhisattva path

by placing obstacles in your way.

It is quite difficult to maintain this kind of nonattachment. It is certainly more difficult than maintaining equanimity towards the taste of what you eat. Overcoming the sense organ of the body is not easy. When you are healthy, you don't pay attention to your body, but even a slight pain in your hand, for example, will make you feel very uncomfortable. Or if you sit in meditation, and I tell you not to move for an hour or a number of hours, what will happen to you? You will develop quite a bit of resentment towards your body. You will find that you have no control over it. You won't just feel hard and soft, smooth and rough, hot and cold; you will feel pain, numbness, itch, and soreness. None of these are easy to take.

You may think an itch is easier to withstand than pain. Generally this is true. But if your eyes itch, your nose itches, and your ears itch, it's not so easy to say, "Itch, you won't bother me. I'm just going to sit here."

Of course there are different levels of pain and different levels of itch. Pain, after a while, starts to feel like coolness. A terrible itch, however, will never produce a feeling of happiness.

When we sit in meditation, we should not pay attention to sensations in the body, regardless of whether we sense pain, itch, numbness, or soreness. If you can effectively contemplate sensation as illusion – the body as illusion, or if you can practice the contemplation of emptiness and see that





your body does not belong to you, then the sensations in the body will disappear.

How you are affected by the sense of touch depends on the environment and your mental state. Someone whose mental state is calm and stable will sense everything in his or her environment, but will not be buffeted from one chaotic mental state to another. Such a person can sense what is smooth and rough, hot and cold, hard and soft, but will not be vulnerable to sudden mood swings because of these sensations.

Young people especially are very reactive to extremes in temperature. They shudder with cold and wilt in the heat. But people with better mental cultivation can keep their minds cool or warm to compensate for the environment. Their experience will be much different from that of someone who lacks such mental control.

About twenty years ago a number of monks got together with the Venerable Jen Chun, who is now living in New Jersey. They were in Taiwan at that time and they visited a number of temples. On the first day they had quite a distance to travel and the weather was extremely hot. The other monks complained and said that they had picked a bad day to travel. “Nonsense,” said Ven. Jen Chun, “we monks spend most of our time indoors. This is a great opportunity for a sunbath.” In the afternoon they started out on the next leg of their journey, and instead of the sun beating down, buckets of rain poured down and soaked them through and through. Once again the monks complained that they had chosen a very inauspicious day to travel. “We must have



very bad karma,” they said. But Reverend Jen Chun rebuked them, “Haven’t you read the *Lotus Sutra*? It tells us that the Buddha gives the precious rain to all sentient beings. So our situation is really auspicious: the heat of vexation is cooled by this rain. For you to say that this is bad karma shows that you don’t know what you’re talking about.” The Reverend added that in India in a heavy rain, monks will often take off their robes to cool and wash their bodies. He said, “These days we’re just too embarrassed to take off our clothes and wash ourselves in the rain.”

Thus the sutra shows us that our bodily sensations – what we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell – are determined by our mental state. Control this and you can control vexation.

## **The Sense Organ of the Mind**

December 7, 1986

The Buddha continues speaking to Ananda about the nature of the sense organs; he speaks about the sense organ of the mind itself.

The sutra follows the same format for the mind as it has done for the other senses. The mind, also, has three conditions associated with it. First, the duality of the sleeping and waking states; second, the sense organ itself, and finally, the void.

In the sutra's terminology, the "waking state" refers to the mind when it functions in a controlled state, that is, the conscious thinking of the intellect; the "sleeping state" refers to the mind when in its uncontrolled, non-thinking state. Since the mind is not fully functioning as a sense organ (the second condition) in the sleeping state, we might ask, "Who are we when we are asleep? Who are we when we are awake?" Now if we examine the third condition, the void, we see that there is mind beyond both the waking and sleeping states.

If we examine all of these conditions associated with the sense organ of the mind, we see that no single condition is sufficient to give rise to the mind's function. For example, when someone is dead, the sense organ may still be intact, but it will not function. There will be no thinking and no dreaming. Thus the sense organ itself cannot give rise to the

function of the mind. The sutra states that all arguments are false that seek to prove the existence of the mind by virtue of these conditions.

Why do we go to sleep? We close our eyes and our body falls asleep. But which part of the body falls asleep? We cannot say that the entire body falls asleep, because parts of it continue to function. And when we are awake, parts of the body may rest. Therefore, we can't really identify rest with sleep. Sleeping is concerned with the sense organ of the mind.

What do we mean by the sense organ of the mind? We know that our body has a nervous system which is controlled by our brain, but we do not know what part of the mind can be identified with the nervous system.

Sleep is necessary for ordinary people. But if you can substitute other organs for the function of sensing, sleep is not necessary. For example, ordinary beings use their ears to hear and their eyes to see. But other parts of the body can sometimes be used to sense sights and sounds. Not only practitioners, but even animals can sometimes do this. There are lower forms such as earthworms which have no specialized sense organs, but can survive quite well in response to their environment, as if they did have these organs. There are many martial arts stories that describe highly developed people who, even if they are deaf or blind, can accurately sense what is around them. Some of the more fantastic stories may be the product of the writer's imagination, but there are people in real life, deaf people, for

example, who can tell quite well where things are in relation to themselves.

I once met a man who was blind from birth, but he could distinguish a remarkable number of characteristics about the people he encountered. He could tell someone's age and details of his face simply from hearing him talk. When I asked him if he had really been blind from birth, he replied, "Yes, of course." I said, "Then how can you tell all those things?" He answered, "I use my ears. He also added that he was in touch with sensations in his body that would allow him to deduce what was going on around him. It was as if his body was a pair of eyes. But this person is a monk; he has a calm mind. Ordinary people, who have their five senses intact, don't pay much attention to subtle bodily sensations. Because this monk was blind from birth, he had become highly conscious of minor sensations, and he had practiced diligently to sharpen his awareness.

There was a general who lived during the Northern and Southern Dynasties in China. He had started out as a bandit, and he was quite proficient in the martial arts. His hearing was particularly acute. He would dig a hole in his tent, listen, and in a short time he would be able to identify the movements of enemy troops. Because of this, he didn't have to rely on spies for his information.

There is also a piece of folk wisdom that says that ants will know when it's going to rain, and accordingly will move to a new location. Another saying has it that rats and mice can sense a fire before it begins.

During the Second World War there was a terrible fire in Chungking. A few days before it began, all of the rats in the vicinity suddenly crossed the Yangtze River. Although many of the rats died, most of them survived by holding onto one another by the ear or the tail in order to form a bridge to the other shore. This event was noted in local newspapers. A few days later the fire broke out as a result of Japanese bombing. Do you think some of the mice had been hiding in Japanese headquarters and heard the decision? No, there was really nothing spectacular about this event. It was just that the bodies of the mice were somehow aware of imminent disaster.

Why do we need sleep? It is because of our sense organs. When they tire, the body must rest. If you can use your sense organs interchangeably, allowing one to take over the function of another when the first grows weary, then you will never need to sleep. People who are just beginning meditation practice often ask, “Can I sleep less?” They have read in novels, especially martial arts novels, that you can remain awake almost indefinitely. In theory this is true. But you must practice to achieve such a state. Meditation requires effort. But if you can meditate without using your sense organs, then meditation can be like rest. If you can tell a sense organ to stop functioning, it will be at rest. If you could thoroughly master this technique, you would be able to carry on your daily tasks 24 hours a day, and there would be no need to even meditate.

A practitioner can reach a state where the sense organs are truly at rest. If you reach this point, you will need little sleep.

Nevertheless, it will still be difficult for you to perform your everyday tasks. There are some animals that are forced to do without sleep, and they can survive in these circumstances, but their life span is quite short. Modern chicken farms keep their chickens awake and feed them continuously. The chickens can lay up to three eggs a day, but they do not live very long.

Lower animal forms can rest their sense organs and sleep less, but this is due, in part, to the fact that they lack the higher thinking functions possessed by humans. But humans cannot cut off these functions very easily.

Through dedicated practice you may go without sleep for as long as three months. But this is not something that just anybody can accomplish. In this practice the sense organs are not used at all. The practice consists of a solitary retreat that lasts three months. This is not an easy method. In the beginning you will want to sleep. You hold on to a rope suspended from the ceiling when you feel you are about to drop. You keep walking. You are not allowed to even sit. In three months you will have no desire to sleep at all.

There is another method. You just sit. You can sleep, but you do it sitting up. You don't lie down; you just sit and sleep. Your mind remains clear, but you do not use your sense organs. This is a good method. If you can train yourself in this way, then your overall ability to reason and make judgments will be enhanced.

There is also a method of visualization whereby you imagine

yourself in a bathtub with the water filled up to your head. You unplug the drain and let the water flow out slowly. You sense the water gradually receding until the bathtub is empty. You will feel no pressure at all. The sense of your body remains, but your mind is blank, clear, and highly aware.

This is a method for calming and resting the mind. When the mind is empty, the sense organs are at rest. When you have a problem falling asleep or when you are particularly anxious, you can try this method. You can try it at home, but make sure that you are by yourself; it won't work with two people looking at each other. The length of time that it takes for the visualized water to drain out depends on how large or small a drain you imagine. You should try to avoid extremes. If you let the water out too fast, you won't experience the calming effect; and if you let it out too slowly, your mind will begin to wander.

Someone who is unable to let his sense organs rest may eventually lose his senses, that is to say, become insane. Even in mild cases where the sense organs are constantly active – when there is a high level of tension and nervousness – the body as a whole will become weakened.

I should point out that when the sutra refers to the sense organs and their functions, it refers to direct and indirect responses. Direct responses involve seeing and hearing, senses that function automatically. Indirect responses include the powers of reasoning and memory.

If you can control your sense organs, your practice is already



at a good level. But if you cannot control them, then you are apt to become moody and unstable. But what the sutra tells us is that the sense organs basically have no real existence. They seem to exist only because of the coming together of causes and conditions. But if the sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind) are not real, then the sense objects (what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, felt, and thought) are also illusory. The six sense organs and the six sense objects are referred to in the sutra as the twelve *ayatanas*, or entries.

I must emphasize that Buddhism does not deny the existence of real-life phenomena – what common sense tells us we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, or think. We can accept the existence of these things. However, Buddhism does not consider these phenomena to have intrinsic existence. Because they are subject to change and influence, their existence is conditional. Even these conditions have no intrinsic existence. The existence of all of these things is only a conditioned, illusory idea.

From the point of view of ordinary sentient beings, these phenomena do exist. But from the enlightened point of view, they have no true existence. It is for this reason that there is really no basis for us to have attachments, and it is our attachments that are the source of all of our vexations.

## The Twelve Entries

December 14, 1986

In the passage from the sutra that we will discuss today, the Buddha discusses the twelve ayatanas, or entries, and he speaks about the sense organ of the eye and its object.

When the six sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind) come into contact with the six sense objects (what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, felt, thought), they comprise the twelve ayatanas. When this contact occurs, the six functions of the mind (the six sense consciousnesses) are generated. (The twelve ayatanas and the six sense consciousnesses are collectively known as the eighteen realms.)

The Sanskrit term “ayatana” is usually translated as “entry” or “field.” What is the meaning of this term? We might also define it as “generation” or “occurrence.” This is because when contact occurs between a sense organ and a sense object, conditions arise. This creates an “occurrence.”

For ordinary sentient beings these twelve entries are nothing other than the physical world. The six sense organs are material and, accordingly, the six sense objects are material. These are worldly dharmas, or phenomena.

According to fundamental Buddhadharma, which transcends this world, these sense organs and objects are spuriously named, because they refer to that which does not really exist. For ordinary sentient beings the twelve entries do

have true existence. Actually, this illusory existence which I speak of is not separate from true existence. It is just that for enlightened beings it is simply one point of view. For ordinary sentient beings, it is all there is.

To illustrate this, we can use the analogy of water and waves. What sentient beings see are the waves. Sometimes the waves are big; sometimes they are small; sometimes numerous; sometimes few. But the Buddha sees the totality of the water and the waves, as well as what sentient beings see. He sees the waves, but he knows where they really come from. Ordinary sentient beings grasp only the temporary, the transient, and the illusory. Because their minds move, they see only waves as concrete phenomena having their own individual existence. The Buddha sees everything as arising from True Suchness. His mind does not move. He does not have the vexations that ordinary sentient beings have.

Ordinary sentient beings are attached to temporary, illusory phenomena, and thus they generate all manner of mental activity. This mental activity, triggered by illusory phenomena, does not represent the True Mind. How does this mental activity arise? It comes from the twelve entries.

In order to instruct us as to just how the twelve entries are illusory, the Buddha uses the example of the sense organ of the eye and its object, that which is seen. He shows that neither the eye nor its object has any true existence. To illustrate this point he asks Ananda to observe what he sees around him. They were seated in the Jetavana Park at the time. The Buddha asks Ananda, “Do the objects cause your



eye to see them, or does your eye cause them to be seen?”

If you answer that it is the sense objects that cause the eye to see them, then why are there so many other things in the world that are not seen? Therefore, their existence alone is not sufficient for them to cause the eyes to see them.

Another important condition that must exist for seeing to occur is that of space and spatial relationships. There must be sufficient distance between the eye and its object and the object must have sufficient size before it can be seen. But space alone is not enough to enable us to see. Space is void, empty; it cannot be the source of seeing. Here the sutra moves out of the realm of common sense. The sutra is pointing to the truth of the non-existence of phenomena.

Can we say that it is because of the sense organ of the eye that we are able to see? There are various forms, colors, and shapes attributable to sense objects. The eye cannot produce these things. There must be something in front of us to see, otherwise seeing cannot take place.

So how do we see things? Earlier we said that sight occurs when the sense organ and its object come into contact. We say that cause meets condition. There is really nothing separate that can be called “seeing.” Anything that exists throughout the coming together of causes and conditions has no true existence. It arises in coming together, and it perishes in separation. It has no true dharma, no true existence. Thus both the sense organ and the sense object have existence only so far as they arise through causes and conditions. This does



not mean that causes and conditions have true existence. To believe this would be to make a mistake equal in gravity to the first misconception, that the organ and object have true existence. Causes and conditions also have no true existence.

To know that all dharmas are false is to know that we should not be attached to them. Perhaps this should be a motto, a principle to live by. Is there any problem with this? Someone who adhered to this line of reasoning would not be attached to any objects in particular. But he or she would still be attached to philosophical speculations, concepts, and ideas. This would still amount to attachment, and there would still be vexation. To say, “I am a Buddhist. I follow the True Path,” is to remain however subtly, attached to a sense of self. It is to continue to live in vexation.

During the Buddha’s time there was another religious leader who sought out the Buddha in order to debate him. He asked, “What is your highest principle?” The Buddha replied, “I don’t have a highest principle. Everything to me is the truth.” This may sound like a piece of sophistry, but the point is that as long as there is any kind of attachment to anything at all, this cannot represent an enlightened state.

Thus when the sutra says, “Form and seeing are false. All phenomena arise from causes and conditions,” we shouldn’t hold to this principle. This does not mean, however, that things just happen and arise spontaneously.

Many people believe this to be true. When asked how they came to meet their spouse, they may say, “Oh, we just

happened to meet and get married.” Such a view holds to the idea of no cause and no consequence – no causal relationship between things. Buddhism does not accept this. Buddhism speaks of cause and consequences. Things do not “just happen.”

Recently, I received a letter from a disciple in Taiwan who told me that he has been reading Buddhist books very diligently, especially those that I have written. He writes to me of incidents where he encounters people of other religions who nonetheless make prostrations to the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. When he talks to them, he usually discovers that what they say does not correspond to true Buddhadharma. He then quarrels with them, and shows them my books, and says, “Look what it says here...”

Everyone has opinions. Husbands and wives with different habits and expectations often get on each others nerves. Different people see things differently. There is really no sense in arguing, though. These things are really nothing more than waves with illusory existence. There is no point arguing about illusory things.

When some people see leaves fall they feel sad; they may feel that the year is fading without meaning. Other people see the leaves fall, and they think of snow and the new year. These attitudes are completely different. Some people may have read foolish martial arts stories that depict monks unfavorably. Others, who may have heard Buddhadharma, may deeply respect a monk when they see one, and prostrate to him. Unfortunately, there are many more people who have



read these stupid martial arts stories.

In Hong Kong at one time, monks and nuns were looked down upon. When people saw them, they would spit on their bald heads. So the monks and nuns began to wear hats or take umbrellas with them. There were superstitious gamblers who thought of their bald heads as bad omens. Once again, it is the nature of our differing view points that cause us to see things as we do. All of this is illusory. It is in fact a double illusion, at the very least. There is the primary illusion of the sense organ and object contact, and there is the illusion of the prejudice that is heaped upon what you perceive.

In training a parrot, the trainer hides behind a mirror and repeats the sounds that he wants the bird to mimic. The parrot thinks he is seeing another parrot, and copies what he sees, but it is only his own reflection that he sees.

So who are our enemies? Are they inside us or are they somewhere outside? Someone just said that the enemy exists in our own imagination.

Very often what exists within your own mind is the source of the enmity you feel towards another. Once, a couple who could not stand each others habits approached me. The wife asked me for a method to help her deal with the situation. I gave her a method, but it didn't work for her. However, one day while reading a book, she came upon a passage that said, "You and your husband are not the same, so there is no need for you to agree all of the time." This idea worked for her. She told me about her success, and I said, "That's exactly what I



told you.” She agreed. But of course she hadn’t been ready to hear it when she first came to me. Only when she became so sick of the situation was she then prepared to change. This is called, “the ripening of causes and condition.”

It is by living through the twelve entries only and not seeing their illusory nature that we experience all of the vexations that we do.



## **The Sense Organs of the Ear and the Nose**

December 21, 1986

The Buddha continues to explain the relationship of the sense organs and sense objects to Ananda. In today's selection he explains the relationship of the ear to sound and the nose to smell.

The first passage concerns the ear and sound. The Buddha asks Ananda to reflect on the sound of the drum that is beaten to alert the assembly that food is ready and the sound of the bell which tells the assembly to come together. He asks whether sounds come to the ear or the ear goes out to the sounds. Proceeding with this argument, the Buddha shows that hearing and sound have no location, and that they are neither causal, nor conditional, nor self-existent; hence, both are false.

Common sense tells us that sound comes to the ears and it is the ears that hear sound. There is no doubt about this. But to show us the ultimate falsity of both the sense organ of the ear and sound, the sutra adopts the rhetorical method of seeking for a true, absolute, unchanging existence to these phenomena. Thus if sound had a true existence of its own, there would be no need for the ears to hear it. And by the same token, if the ears were self-existent, sound would already be present within them, and there would be no need for hearing to occur. The sutra tells us, then, that there is no such thing as hearing existing by itself, because only the interaction of the sense organ of the ear and sound allows hearing to occur.

In explaining this, the Buddha uses traveling as an analogy. He states that if he were originally in one place, and then traveled somewhere else, he would no longer be in the place from which he started his journey. This is simply to say that a person can't be in two different places at the same time. According to Buddhist logic, if a person had true self-existence, he would be everywhere at the same time.

Applying this reasoning to sound as something with intrinsic self-existence, you cannot say that it is something that was at first not present, originated elsewhere, and then finally came to be here. This is not the understanding of Buddhadharma. Yes, common sense tells us that sound originates from somewhere and enters our ears. But in understanding Buddhadharma, we must separate what we call sound and what we call the sense organ of hearing. What is the relationship between them? If none of us had ears, would sounds exist? From the point of view of Buddhadharma, neither the sense organ nor its object has true existence.

Most of us believe that sound enters our ears rather than the other way around. But if one hundred people hear a sound, the sound as a self-existent entity cannot be said to simply arrive at only one person's ears. On the other hand, if we consider the ears as something subjective which extend out to sound, how in the example given could the disciples hear so many different sounds? How could their ears go out to so many different places?

To summarize, the sutra first refutes the argument that sound has an intrinsic existence. It next refutes the concept that



the sense organ of the ear has an exclusive role in hearing. The sutra then speaks of causes and conditions, the idea of interdependency among things. Thus, in order for a sound to be heard, there must be both ear and sound. If these two elements are lacking, there is no hearing. Hearing, then, occurs only by virtue of the simultaneous arising of the sense organ of the ear and sound.

The sutra states that all dharmas, in the sense of phenomena, arise from causes and conditions and thus are ever changing. But even to hold to this understanding that all is change can in itself spawn attachment. However, you cannot say that phenomena simply arise spontaneously, by accident. There *are* causes and conditions. Actually, in the final analysis, you can neither assert nor refute their existence.

This section of the sutra teaches us to cut through our attachment to sound. We know that there are pleasant sounds and repulsive sounds, whether they are produced by humans, animals, or inanimate objects. Both the pleasant and the repulsive sounds lead to attachment, and therefore to vexation. But the sutra teaches that sound has no real existence and that our ears do not really hear sounds. It is really an illusion that we experience. If we could thoroughly understand this, we would be more detached from our surroundings. Note that detachment does not mean lack of involvement.

This understanding of the true nature of the ear and sound can be used as a method of practice. It is not meant to be a scientific argument to refute the existence of sound. It is





simply a method to help our practice.

Many sounds can cause us distress. Take the sound of a saw on dry wood. It may feel as if it is enough to make the ears explode. Perhaps the goose, which has no ears, is the best practitioner. It will be undisturbed by any noise.

What do you think is the most beautiful sound? It depends on who you are. If you are in love, it will be the sound of your boyfriend or girlfriend. If you are a father or a mother, it is the sound of your child's laughter. Even if you are beset with heavy vexations, such sounds may relieve your distress for the moment.

There is perhaps more agreement on what the worst sounds are. But for me it is the sound of my own voice. I really detest it.

The sutra shows us that sound has no intrinsic existence. Whatever you hear has nothing to do with you. You may hear it, but it has no meaning for you.

We have plans to move the Center to a different building. In the last few days we had to sign a contract and deal with a fastidious lawyer. The buyer didn't mind the parking lot at the back of the Center, but the lawyer made a big deal out of it. This is just one example of how two people can have totally different views of the same thing. Once again it depends on causes and conditions. If you have an argument with your spouse, his or her voice can suddenly seem quite unpleasant indeed. Attitude is all. We should have the attitude



that when we hear sounds, they are only sounds and nothing more. They have nothing to do with us.

Generally speaking, on the first day of a retreat, practitioners are very aware of the sounds around them. On the second or third day, however, most practitioners will no longer be aware of outside sounds unless their minds are scattered. The sounds still exist and the ears continue to function, but the practitioner no longer uses his sense organ. The relationship between the sound and the ear is severed. Thus the practitioner no longer hears sounds.

When I was living in mainland China, I saw a woman who had a number of very small children. I knew that one child can be noisy enough, two can create a real racket, and seven or eight would be bedlam. I couldn't imagine how anyone could survive so much disruptive noise, so I asked her how she managed to get through her day with the constant din. She simply told me, "I don't hear anything." She wasn't deaf. She just didn't hear the noise, or more accurately, she didn't pay any attention to it. In that respect she's a good practitioner. But it is most probable that she would only be able to tolerate the sound of her own children. Someone else's might annoy her.

If you can adopt the methods described in the sutra, you can sever the tie between the sense organ and the sound. You have to make this a regular focus of contemplation, however. Eventually you can arrive at the state where you can hear any sound and not be vexed by it.



However, it wouldn't be a good idea to try to adopt this method at school. In Taiwan there are numerous cases of people going on retreat, returning to school, and then claiming that they can't hear the professor, that they don't know what he's talking about. So some people might wonder about the merits of a Chan retreat. Once you go, you seem to come back an idiot.

What the sutra describes is a method and an understanding to be used in the right situation and in the proper way.

The next section of the sutra is concerned with the sense organ and sense object of the nose. The Buddha uses the example of burning sandalwood to illustrate his point. Once again he shows that a sense, in this case smelling, is neither causal, nor conditional, nor self-existent. To accomplish this he poses a question about the origin of smelling. From where does it originate – the sandalwood, the nose, or the void? The smell cannot originate from the nose, because the nose is not sandalwood. And if it originates from the wood, then the nose should be filled with incense smoke. Yet the sutra tells us that the fragrance can be smelled for a distance of about thirteen miles, far beyond the reaches of the sandalwood smoke. And how could it come from the void, which is eternal and unchanging? If this were so the fragrance would be eternally present, and there would be no need to light incense.

Common sense tells us that odors and fragrances originate from without and are smelled by the nose. But the sutra, using the same dialectic it has from the outset, shows that





there is no intrinsic existence to the nose and its sense object, that which is smelled.

The sutra says that it is the coming together of causes and conditions that allows smelling to take place. The nose can distinguish fragrant and repulsive, and to some extent it can distinguish various tastes, sour, pungent, bitter, sweet. Perhaps the nose is more powerful than the tongue, which cannot distinguish odor or fragrance. Humans have a fairly sensitive sense of smell, not as powerful as that of dogs, but certainly more acute than that of birds.

It is a good thing for us to have sharp senses, if we wish to survive. It gives us a better chance in difficult situations. But in practice, we try to close up the five senses. In this way we reduce our vexations. When I was living in Tokyo, I visited an old Dharma master. I kept him company in the mountains. One day he said that he wanted some coffee. I said, “But master, how can we get coffee up here?” I didn’t notice anything, but he could really smell it. The master insisted that there must be some place in the village that was selling coffee. Indeed, when we went down to the village, we found that there was a store that had it. The master had such an acute sense of smell that it led him to feel thirsty when he smelled coffee, and it caused him to desire some to drink. Such sense acuity can lead to trouble.

Once I was in the mountains and didn’t realize what a long way I had to go before I reached my destination. I had no food with me. At one point I smelled some food frying. I became very hungry and my stomach started to growl. The smell had



come from some distance. Later I saw the family that was frying the food, but I couldn't ask for any. The tradition of begging for food doesn't exist in China, although it does in India. I had no recourse but to forget about my stomach and to keep on walking. There are so many pleasing smells and so many repulsive ones. It is really difficult to reach the stage where you are no longer affected by any odor or fragrance.

I asked Sheila how long she had been a vegetarian, and she said five years. She said that the smell of meat doesn't bother her. But I get a headache from the smell of meat. I can't even get close to certain restaurants that cook meat. Maybe it's some kind of an allergy. Perhaps my practice isn't what it should be if these smells still bother me.

The scent of your body depends upon the food you eat. Some people find certain body scents more repulsive than others. But what is repulsive for one person may be attractive to another. If you find the scent of another person's body attractive, it probably means that you have good karmic affinity with him or her.

The responses we have correspond to how we are constituted physically. Thus, different individuals have different attachments. However, the basic principle is still the same: it is the interaction of the scent and the nose that leads to attachment and vexation. Again, if you can end the relationship between the sense organ and its object, attachment and vexation will lessen. In reality, then, there is no such thing as a fragrant or a unpleasant smell. Smell itself has no intrinsic self-existence. It is the coming together of



nose and scent that produces the sense of smell. So, the sutra says, both nose and smell are neither causal, nor conditional, nor self-existent.

Most sentient beings are afflicted with greed, anger and hatred. They have greed for pleasant smelling things and hatred for bad odors. Hatred can lead to anger, and in every case, vexation. It is to lessen these things that we practice. There is a Chinese saying: Stay long enough in a greenhouse and the fragrance will no longer please you. Likewise, you lose your sensitivity to a foul smell after some time. Maybe if I were forced to stay in a restaurant that serves meat, I would get over my reaction to the smells and my headaches would stop.

There is an important point concerning the Chinese saying. There is a danger in becoming used to some things. If you continually generate bad karma, you might become accustomed to it, and you will lose your conscience and begin to feel no remorse for what you do. This is a misunderstanding of non-attachment. It does not mean simply taking things lightly with no thought to the consequences. What we should try to do is to plant the seeds of merit and virtue.

## **The Sense Organs and Objects of Taste and Touch**

January 1, 1987

I will continue to speak on the senses and their sense objects in the *Shurangama Sutra*. Today we will concentrate on the tongue and its object, taste, and on the body and the sense of touch.

Once again as he has done for the other senses, the Buddha explains to Ananda that taste has no real existence. He uses the example of the butter and cream that Ananda may get occasionally when he is begging. The Buddha shows that the sense of taste does not arise from the tongue, or from the food that the tongue tastes, or from the void.

If what the Buddha said is true, how can you tell that food tastes good or bad? Is it your taste that tastes good, or is it the food that tastes good? Nobody would ever say, “My tongue tastes good today.” Someone might say that the food is very good, but is the food delicious in itself? By itself food is unknowing. Food has no mind, and no idea what taste is or what is delicious. The tongue, too, is tasteless, and by itself does not know what taste is. It is only when there is contact between the tongue and food that there is a sense of taste, a sense of something being delicious or unpleasant.

When I first came to the United States eleven years ago, I gave a talk in which I used the example of a mango as something delicious. But some of my students had never eaten a mango,

and they didn't know what I was talking about. I described it as something that is wonderful to the taste – sweet and juicy. But those who have never tasted a mango cannot know what it really tastes like through my description alone. For them the mango really has no taste.

I have said that neither the mango nor the tongue has any taste in and of itself. Where then does taste come from? Could it be that taste comes from emptiness, from nothing? Let's examine this idea. Before mangos existed there was no such thing as a mango taste. Even after mangos came into existence, before anyone took a bite of one, there was still no such thing as mango taste because no one had tasted one. Could it be that the taste simply arrived from emptiness, from nothingness and then turned into something?

This is still not a reasonable assumption. Because if taste came from emptiness, or the void, we would be able to taste any taste we wanted just by licking space. To further illustrate this point, if there were a particular taste, say saltiness, in the air or in space, that would mean that your whole body lived in that salty environment, like a fish living in the sea. If that were the case, you would be able to taste saltiness on your hand or your cheek – on every part of your body. And we know that this is not true.

The underlying point of this discussion is that every dharma, or phenomenon, arises directly from the coming together of causes and conditions. It is not just taste, but all things that come together as a result of causes and conditions.

There is one condition that we have not spoken of that is necessary for taste to occur. That is spatial relationship – distance and nearness. Food must come into contact with the tongue for there to be taste. If an apple is out of reach, you cannot taste it. It must be brought into contact with the mouth and tongue before you can know its taste.

There is a kind of Chinese bean curd with a very strong flavor that some Chinese really dislike. There are of course those who like it, just as there are those in the West who like blue cheese and there are others who can't stand it.

There is a theory that foods like this cause cancer, but apparently Chinese are fearless in their pursuit of what they like to eat. The pungency of the foods is not really what you taste. It is really something that you tolerate because of the delicious taste of the food. Do you accept that?

There are many people who are very particular about what they eat. They insist on eating the most delicious, carefully prepared dishes that they can find. They are very demanding in restaurants, and those that can afford one will hire a good chef to do all their cooking. If you can't afford a good chef, you can become one yourself. In any case, too much concern about what you eat can lead to trouble.

I read two articles whose points were diametrically opposed to one another. The first said that the development of culinary art was the highest criterion of civilization. Therefore the Chinese, who can make a good meal out of almost anything, are the most advanced people on earth. The second article

said that the overemphasis that Chinese place on food has been the root cause of their poverty; they spend all of their time preparing food rather than developing their civilization. On the other hand, Americans, the article continued, will eat almost anything, even raw beef and over-cooked vegetables. This frees them to pursue more important goals. Of course there are people here at the Center who own restaurants, so it may be somewhat extreme to say that mastery of the art of cooking has caused poverty in China.

Practitioners, however, take a different view of food. They see it as medicine, something which allows the body to function properly. Nobody really says, “This pill tastes delicious, I’ll have another helping.” Nor does anyone say, “That medicine doesn’t look particularly appetizing, I’d rather be sick.” Restaurants have to advertise the quality and taste of their food. They can’t say, “Try our medicine.” But practitioners have a different view.

The point of the *Shurangama Sutra* here is to help liberate us from our greed for food, our greed for taste. The sutra shows us that from the point of view of Buddhadharma, taste is nothing more than an illusion. It has no true intrinsic existence. Food provides our body with necessary nutrition. That is what we as practitioners should be concerned with. Taste is of no importance.

A few years ago I was invited to a Thanksgiving dinner with an American family. The father was so fond of turkey that he practically ate a whole one by himself. He was so stuffed he could hardly move. In fact, he had to crawl on the

floor because of indigestion and that made him look a little like a turkey. It wasn't that he was really hungry, it was his passion for the taste and the sensation of eating that caused his overindulgence.

There's another story found in the sutra: Shakyamuni Buddha and Ananda once saw a spinning worm in a dish of honey water. Normally, monks do not eat after noon, but honey water was sometimes provided for them after a hard day's labor.

When Buddha looked at the worm, it seemed to be quite content swimming around in the honey water. Buddha asked Ananda if he recognized the worm. Ananda said, "No, it's just a worm." But Buddha said, "You should recognize him, because a long time ago, many kalpas in fact, the two of you were monks practicing together. He was a shramanera, a novice monk, and he was very greedy when it came to honey water. He could never get enough of it. He drank all of his share at lunch, and would steal the honey water that belonged to others. As a consequence, he became a worm in honey water, and has remained one for lifetime after lifetime."

I've never seen a worm such as this, but I imagine it's possible for such a creature to survive for long periods in a sweet liquid.

This story shows that even someone who has taken precepts of a monk can be very greedy and driven a passion for taste, and this greed can lead to unfortunate circumstances, indeed. There is no mention in the story about whether this worm



ever regained a human incarnation, but I think that once he has suffered the consequences of his karmic actions, he will practice once again.

Confucius spoke of a time when you might listen without hearing and when you might eat but be but unaware of what you ate. Under what kind of conditions would this occur? This is no problem for an inanimate object such as a wooden statue, but could it happen to a human being? It can if you are fully concentrated on what you are doing. It might happen that your eyes would be open, but you wouldn't see; your ears would be open, but you wouldn't hear, and you would chew and swallow but be unaware of what you ate.

I read a story about a famous Chinese scientist who won the Nobel Prize some thirty years ago. It seems that when he was a young child, no matter what kind of food his mother gave him, he had no memory of it, because he was so absorbed in his studies. This unawareness of sense objects could happen to a practitioner who is working with one-minded determination, or it could happen to someone who is just day dreaming.

Now, this question: If a monk, who is not supposed to eat any meat or fish, is practicing very hard with one-mindedness and someone offers him some meat or fish and he takes it without thinking, what would you think? Has he truly eaten meat or fish? A practitioner such as this might have no recollection of what he had eaten at all, and it would be, in fact, as if he had eaten nothing. It would be the person who brought him the food who had really eaten the meat or fish.



If someone disturbed this practitioner right after he had eaten and asked, “What did you eat?” and he could still recall the taste of the meat and feel the sensations in his mouth, throat, and stomach, then the practitioner had in fact eaten. Even in this case, his original act was involuntary, not premeditated.

It is true that some vexatious stem from the tongue and the sense of taste, but by far the greatest number of vexatious arise through the eyes and the ears, and this is something I will talk about another time.

This is not to say that food can’t be a powerful vexation. In Taiwan there is a lay practitioner, a very sincere Buddhist, who comes to our temple. He is a real gourmet. Often, he will look at the food we serve, determine that it’s not up to his standards, and simply say, “I have to go now.” This has been quite embarrassing to me, him, and the cooks in the temple.

I finally said to him, “Why don’t you just prepare the food you like at home, bring it to the temple, and eat it here?” But he said, “No, that wouldn’t do. Good food must be fresh from the kitchen, hot from the wok. If I brought in food and reheated it, then it would lose all of its flavor.” I don’t know if there’s anybody like that here, but you can certainly see how he causes himself a lot of trouble.

But even if you’re not as compulsive as this man, I’m sure that many of you, even if you’re full, will eat a few more bites of your lunch or dinner. Or maybe you’ll just take some food home so you can munch on it later. Do you think



you're anything like this? Anybody? Everybody? This is very important.

The next passage in the sutra deals with touch, the sense of contact. The Buddha uses the example of touching your head with your hand. The question is, does touch have any true existence?

There are two kinds of contact, with the self and with another – your body touching your own body, or your body touching another's body or another object. The *Shurangama Sutra* only mentions the first kind of contact. Nonetheless, the essence of the second kind of contact is also covered.

There are three necessary elements involved in the sense of touch. In the example given in the sutra, there is first the hand which is touching, and the head which is being touched. The third element is the space in which the touching can occur. Touch arises through the causes and conditions associated with these three elements. What is touch, then? Is it a collection of good feelings, good sensations, bad feelings, uncomfortable sensations? If you smash yourself in the head with your fist, that is not the best feeling in the world. But if you massage your head with your hand, that can feel pretty good. Then again there are sadists and masochists, who like to hit or be hit. They might enjoy some things that we would find very unpleasant. Is there anyone like that here?

Some types of contact with your own body can be very pleasant, like massaging yourself, rubbing your ear, or scratching an itch. Then there are those who don't really

like to come into close contact with another. Such people seldom choose to be married. They are quite satisfied to be in contact with themselves. Some people really like to be touched by others, and this makes them feel good. It depends on the individual and who is doing the touching. You may like being touched by one person but not by another.

In Taiwan there was a woman who used to bring her child to the temple. I would always touch his head, and give him a piece of candy. The child would recognize me and would seem to be quite happy. Every time he came to the temple, I would touch him and give him candy. But there was a monk, one of my disciples, who also tried to touch the child's head, but the child would get upset and start to cry. Why did the child like one person's hand and not another's?

Adults are like this, too. You may be lightly touched by someone you like, and this may bring you a feeling of joy or contentment. But someone you hate may bring up feelings of revulsion if he or she is even ten feet away from you. Most of you have probably had experiences like these. But if you understand the *Shurangama Sutra*, you can respond in the same way as the practitioner we mentioned who can eat and be unaware of what he is eating. You will not have so much of a psychological response to touch. You will not react with like or dislike when someone touches you or you touch yourself.

I read a book about acupressure the other day and it mentioned the beneficial effects this procedure can have. Done on a regular basis, it helps promote good physical

health and improves the feeling of well being. But to be done correctly acupressure has to hurt. It is not quite the same thing as massage. It is meant to treat physiological problems. Its pleasantness or unpleasantness is not the question; it is therapeutic. The practice of acupressure has its origin in Taoist training, for it involves the flow of energy in the body. I teach some exercises that incorporate these principles.

So you see, I am not against contact, as I am not against food or the sensation of taste. These are necessary parts of life. But the point is that we should not be attached to these sensations, otherwise our vexations will be numerous. If you are attached to a particular kind of sensation, this can lead to a variety of difficulties. Imagine someone who will only allow one type of fabric to touch his or her skin, and will wear nothing else. Such a person will often be inconvenienced.

There are different kinds of contact and feelings: there is fine, rough, smooth, hard, soft, hot and cold. Most people prefer the soft, the smooth, the fine, and the warm. How about the opposite – what is hard, rough, coarse, and cold? Many of you detest such sensations. Sometimes what may seem to be good or comfortable is deceptive. Many of you like soft beds that your body can really sink into. But what do you think this does to your body? If you are used to only what is warm and comfortable, what happens when things get rough? If you're exposed to cold conditions, chances are you will catch a cold immediately. We speak of a flower that grows in a greenhouse as something that will not be able to weather harsh conditions.

There is a story of a man who grew up to become a high ranking officer even though he came from a poor background and an undistinguished family. When he became rich, he traveled only in a sedan chair carried by twelve people, which had its own firepot to keep him warm. One day he heard the men who were carrying him say that it was very cold outside. Since he had a firepot next to him, he didn't believe them, so he stuck his hand outside into the air. Just that was enough to give him a cold, and he went home and later died of pneumonia. The people carrying him were used to the cold, so nothing happened to them.

Serious practitioners should always train themselves to adapt to harsh conditions and inhospitable environments. It is for this reason that many of them live in mountain caves. What are their beds made of? Rock. If you slept on rocks for one night, your body would ache all over. Even we should train ourselves to endure rough conditions. This will help us to maintain a healthy body and reduce our vexations. But if we find ourselves in a comfortable environment, we should accept it. And if we find ourselves in difficult circumstances, that should be fine, too.

Nevertheless, there have been times when I found it difficult to enjoy comfort. I lived in the mountains when I was in Japan, but once I visited an important guest in a hotel. The room was warm and the bed was soft. I opened the windows and slept on the floor. I found even the rug too thick for my liking. When the attendants saw the blankets on the floor, they thought that someone else had stayed in the room. But in Buddhadharma there's no conception that someone has



such poor karma that he can't enjoy what he has no matter how little or how much that is. But I guess that I wasn't born to enjoy comfort.

When people come to the Center, they sometimes ask where all the beds are for the people who stay here. I tell them the floor is our bed. There was even a woman who came to the Center to go on retreat, but the idea that there were no beds may have been too much for her. She never came back.

I have spoken of eleven of the twelve entries to date, that is, the six sense organs and the six kinds of sense objects. I will speak about the twelfth one when I come back from Taiwan. You are all welcome to come back for that.



## Other Books in English by Master Sheng Yen

*(A partial listing)*

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