Until We Reach Buddhahood

Lectures on the Shurangama Sutra

Master Sheng Yen

Volume Two

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 Volume One, 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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Dharma Drum Mountain

Preface to Volume One

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, 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, with the title, *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

Preface to Volume Two

This is the second of two volumes of selected lectures on the *Shurangama Sutra* by Master Sheng Yen that appeared in Chan Newsletter, until its final issue in August 1997. In Volume One, in meticulous detail and with great insight, Master Sheng Yen discussed the Buddha's explanation to his disciple Ananda, of the nature of the phenomenal world that sentient beings experience. In the Buddha's analysis, the world of phenomena consists of the eighteen realms, namely: the six sense organs, the six sense objects, and the six sense consciousnesses. These eighteen realms are the products of the twelve links of conditioned arising, and the law of cause and effect (karma), which together give rise to the five skandhas, the foundation of what we perceive to be our individual self.

Taking each of the realms separately, Master Sheng Yen explained how the Buddha convinces Ananda that the fundamental nature of the eighteen realms is that of emptiness. And since the five skandhas are nothing more than the product of the eighteen realms, they too are empty of self.

In Volume Two, Master Sheng Yen continues his explanation

of the eighteen realms and conscious existence. He explains how the eighteen realms are not only the causal ground of the illusion of an existing self, but that they are also the means by which sentient beings can attain liberation. In the chapter "The Story of Vision," he says: "Those [enlightened beings] act within the eighteen realms unfettered by vexations. Such perfected beings perceive that the eighteen realms are neither separate nor different from Buddha Nature, or True Suchness. They perceive that the Dharma Body of all Buddhas has always been within these eighteen realms."

The perfected beings that Master Sheng Yen refers to are Bodhisattvas who practice to transform the mind of illusion into the mind of wisdom, one that is free of the three karmas of action, speech, and thought. In the final chapter, Master Sheng Yen tells us, "When penetration is complete, everything is as it is. No matter what you consider good, no matter what you consider bad, everything is as it is. There is no need to seek or to abandon, or to increase or decrease anything. Whatever needs to be done, a Bodhisattva still proceeds to do, but it is done without attachment."

Ernest Heau
Compiler

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the Chan Meditation Center for providing the resources for putting this compilation together: Abbot Ven. Guo Xing, Program Director Ven. Chang Hwa, and Dharma Drum Publishing Director Ven. Guo Sheng. Everlasting thanks to Mr. Ming Yee Wang who provided the concurrent English translations for these lectures. Thanks to Mr. Harry Miller and Ms. Linda Peer for editing many, if not most of the lectures for Chan Newsletter. Thanks also to the many others who contributed, time, effort, and energy to publish Chan Newsletter for nearly 17 years, and to the webmasters for keeping the Chan Center website running today. Last but not least, thanks to Mr. Chih-ching Lee for the layout and design of the text as well as the cover.

Mind and Dharma Dust

April 19, 1987

In my talks on the *Shurangama Sutra* I have been speaking of the twelve ayatanas, or entries, which refer to the six sense organs and the six sense objects. An entry refers to a point or a position at which something can be specified or at which contact can be made.

Today I will deal with the mind and its object, which comprise the eleventh and twelfth entries. Actually, the mind's object can also be translated as "the dust of the senses" or "dharma dust." Dharma is a word often used to describe the mind's object. This "dharma" is not to be confused with Buddhist teachings or the underlying laws of the universe. Dharma can have many meanings. Here it refers to thoughts, ideas, and mental images.

Let's begin with the sense organ of the mind. In the West the functions of the mind are usually described as consciousness, thought and willpower. Many people consider these activities to be purely mental. Others, relying on Western medicine, characterize these phenomena as attributes of the nervous system.

For example, there are drugs which stimulate hormonal secretions and thereby affect the nervous system. Other

drugs, such as narcotics, inhibit the functioning of the nervous system. In China, acupuncture is used to achieve similar results. Today those whose mental illness might once have been thought hopeless can be cured by such methods.

Some people consider the functioning of the mind to be a purely mental, non-physical activity. But if that were absolutely true, how could you increase or decrease someone's intellectual responses by the physical introduction of drugs or other chemicals? Where does the mental realm end and the physical realm begin? What do you think about this?

When I was a child, I was quite slow-witted. In fact, I didn't begin to talk until I was about eight years old. Consequently, when I left home to become a monk, I had great difficulty in reading the sutras. I couldn't memorize anything. My master told me, "You really are a stupid fool." He said that my karmic obstructions were heavy and that only by prostrating 500 times a day to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara could I succeed in removing them.

I did as my master said for three months until one day my head felt calm and cool. It seemed to have opened up and everything that had weighed me down for so long seemed to have been lifted. From that time on I had no trouble memorizing or reciting verses from the sutras. My master said that this was the Bodhisattva responding to me. I believe that this is the case, and therefore this function was purely

mental in that the Bodhisattva intervened and helped me.

But some years ago I spoke to some people about this and they had a different theory. They thought that my increased mental powers had nothing to do with the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. They said that I had been unhealthy when I arrived at the monastery and therefore my chi, or life force, was unable to flow properly through my body. According to this line of reasoning, the prostrations simply served as an exercise to open up the central meridian in my body to allow the proper flow of chi. People who engage in this chi practice say that when they have increased the flow of chi through their central meridian, then they, too, will have increased wisdom. I respect such people, and if there are any of you here who feel that you are somewhat slow-witted, you might want to consult a chi master to help open up your central meridian.

When we speak of the sense organ of the mind, we refer to the brain as it is understood in Western medicine. It is in the brain cells that all our previous experiences are stored. From these we base our judgements and we form the associations of memory. We might compare this to data stored in a computer. Just as the computer's memory might be damaged and cause data loss, memory can be lost if the brain is damaged sufficiently. Accordingly, since the sense organ of this life dies, you will not be able to remember what has happened to you in this life in your next life. Of course

remembrance of past lives might be possible for someone who has developed supernormal powers, but this is an issue which we will not explore today.

Thus the sense organ of the mind is something physical. It includes the cells in our brain and the nerves in our body, which all function through an accumulation of information and experience upon which we base our judgement and actions. We know that forms, shapes, and images are the objects of the eye; sounds are the object of the ear, etc. What then are the objects of the sense organ of the mind? Our experiences are recorded through symbols, mental images, sounds, and the notations of language. These are the sense objects, and they fall into three categories: good, evil, and neutral. They are stored in the sense organ of the mind, and collectively these symbols, sounds, and ideas are referred to as dharma dust, as we stated earlier.

We know that for the function of the mind to arise there must be a sense consciousness in addition to a sense organ and a sense object. Without the addition of consciousness, we are simply talking about the twelve entries, which are basically associated with the physical world. This would be the level of a materialist, who holds that only matter exists. What then would a materialist say about a young person who died in an accident. The brain cells might be intact, but of what could they be conscious? What happens to the memories and experiences contained in those cells?

In recent times many organ transplants have become possible, including kidneys, lungs, and even the heart. What about the brain? Could the brain be transplanted? Whose memory would it contain, the donor or the recipient?

Imagine if part of my brain were damaged and as a remedy part of Nagendra's brain was grafted on to mine. When I remember something, will the memories be mine or will they sometimes be Nagendra's? Will I think of myself as Shifu or as Nagendra? Will I recognize some of his friends whom I've never met if I see them on the street? Would I have a claim on his bank account? If he had been married, would I think that his wife was mine?

Such discussions of the brain and memory are still rooted very much in materiality. But for those who practice Dharma there is another question: what role does memory play in the karma that moves us from rebirth to rebirth? What is the connection between the physical and the mental, or spiritual?

It is true that someone with supernormal powers may perceive the workings of karma, but those without such powers cannot know how karma functions from their own experience. The sutra speaks about the causal relationship that relates one lifetime to another, about cause and consequence. But if we are really to try to understand karma, we must not confine ourselves to the material, but we must also include the six sense consciousnesses.

Note that even though we talk about six sense consciousnesses, there is really only one consciousness. To explain consciousness' functioning, we speak of the first five consciousnesses, eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body, which relate to the physical world, and the sixth consciousness, which relates to the mental world. But really what we call the sixth consciousness includes the first five consciousnesses as well as the seventh and eighth consciousness, which relates to self-centeredness and the storing of previous karma, and which I will discuss shortly. Nonetheless, despite the numbering and division into categories, there is in truth only one consciousness.

Now I will discuss the three categories of functions associated with consciousness. The first category comprises cognition, judgement, and decision. These functions are directly related to the sense organ of the brain and they comprise what can be called the "sixth consciousness in the narrow sense."

The next two categories relate not so much to the physical organ of the brain as to the mind itself. The first of these, the seventh consciousness, relates to self-centeredness. The next, the eighth consciousness, is the storehouse of all previous karma. The seventh consciousness is actually an awareness of the eighth consciousness. It is this ego function which keeps us in the cycle of births and deaths, and which causes the eighth consciousness to be transmitted from one life to the next. The "sixth consciousness in the narrow

sense" disappears at death. Only these latter two continue.

To really know the deepest functioning of consciousness (what we have described as the eighth consciousness) you have to attain Buddhahood. Even Arhats are not aware of the eighth consciousness. They can be aware, however, of the seventh consciousness because that is the aspect of consciousness that holds on to the sense of self. Arhats are free from the cycle of birth and death, and therefore free from the sense of self. When you reach Arhatship you can be aware of the seventh consciousness.

Let us return to the three kinds of symbols we spoke of earlier: the good, the evil, and the neutral. These are the three kinds of dharma dust. By what criteria do we establish these categories of good, evil and neutral? This may seem to be subjective. Is what is good for one person good for another? Is there a "common" consensus to tell us into what category something should fall? Would this be the same for Americans, Chinese, Indians, women, and men?

It is simply impossible for human beings to come to a consensus regarding these categories. This is because we are too self-centered and we cannot arrive at unbiased conclusions. This is why we must rely on the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha does not see anything as good, evil, or neutral. He is free of self-centeredness and only uses these categories for sentient beings so that we can make progress

and eventually reach Buddhahood ourselves. It is for our benefit that Buddha classifies the various acts of body, mind, and speech in terms of good, evil, and neutral.

Something that happened in Taiwan makes an interesting test case of how you might classify another's actions. There was a policeman who was on the run because he was wanted for murder. He had killed someone he believed to be evil. But he knew he had broken the law, so he took his girlfriend and ran away. There was quite a manhunt for them. When they were apprehended at last, the girlfriend was asked why she helped and ran away with a murderer. She replied, "My boyfriend is the most wonderful person in the world. He hasn't done anything wrong. The one he killed was wrong. He was evil and he deserved to die. If what my boyfriend did was wrong, then the laws have to be changed." However, the wife of the murdered man obviously had a different opinion. She said, "The law is the law. This is a cop who is supposed to uphold the law. He deserves to be punished."

It is true that many people disliked the man who was killed. Many thought that he deserved to die. But whether this is so or not, there is nothing in the law that allows someone to become an executioner because of personal likes or dislikes. How would you judge the policeman? Not according to a legal court but to the court of Dharma?

The principle of Dharma should not be used to bring confusion

to secular law – the laws created by the governments of nations. These laws should be the foundations of society, but the Dharma can be the guiding spirit, or principle, in their formation.

Simply deciding that someone is evil does not give you the right to kill him. This is the case in a disorderly society, one with no laws or governance. The policeman could have brought the man to justice rather than killing him. If he is so judged, then he will die by the law. Individual likes and dislikes are subjective. A misguided person might believe that everyone but himself was evil and try to gun down as many people as he can. Such things do happen.

Since the policeman acted on his own and not in accord with the law, he has broken the law. By contrast, someone acting as an agent of the government who participates in an execution is generally not committing murder. There is, of course, another question entirely: whether such harsh laws as the death penalty are fair or not. Just as the policeman's girlfriend said, some laws might have to be changed.

We have discussed the mind and its object and the categories into which these objects fall. It is not important whether or not you understand these passages in the sutra. What is important is practice.

The Story of Vision

April 26, 1987

Some of the basic terminology used in Buddhism In general and the *Shurangama Sutra* specifically, includes the six sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind), the six sense objects (what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, felt, and thought), and the six associated sense consciousnesses. All together these comprise what is called the eighteen realms. The *Shurangama Sutra* uses these concepts to illustrate the fact that the world we see around us, as well as the self we hold on to so dearly, is illusory and without true existence.

For explanatory purposes, Buddhism divides the world in three different ways: the five skandhas, or aggregates (form, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness); the twelve entries (the six sense organs and six sense objects); and the eighteen realms (explained above). These divisions encompass all phenomena in the world including the cultural, the psychological, and the physical.

To have a true understanding of even one of these three ways of analyzing the world is to be on the right path. This is to say that if you have a true, deep, thorough understanding of even one of these ways of looking at the world, then you are already liberated from samsara and you are not far away from Buddhahood.

In past talks we have discussed the five skandhas and the twelve entries. Today we will concentrate on the eighteen realms. The eighteen realms are divided into three groups. The first concerns the physical body; the second, the environment in which the physical body resides; and the third, the mental and psychological activities within us. Thus the first and second groups are basically physical and the third group is mental or psychological.

Analyze any situation and you will find that every event of which we are conscious requires the participation of all three groups. For example, today we celebrated the birthdays of four friends of the Center with a large birthday cake. Consider the act of cutting the cake. The cake is part of the environment. There is the hand that holds the knife in order to cut the cake. And there is a person who is aware that, yes, it's someone's birthday and cutting and eating the cake is part of the celebration. In this one act we have the physical environment, the sense organs, and sense consciousness involved.

Another example: right now you are listening to my talk on the *Shurangama Sutra*. What do we use to listen to this lecture? Do we use our bodies? Do we use our ears, or do we use our minds? This lecture itself is a series of sounds, or vibrations, in the atmosphere, which is itself, part of the environment. These vibrations are the objects of our ears, which are the sense organs of hearing. Finally, to make sense

of these vibrations, we employ the consciousness of hearing. Thus it is these three things coming together, the sense organs, the sense objects, and the interpretive consciousness, that constitutes a cognizable event, such as "listening" to a lecture.

As we said, any event is involved with the eighteen realms. What do we mean by "realm"? It means an analytic boundary. It describes the way in which one function is distinguished from other functions. For example, that which sees is distinguished from that which is seen.

Another example of the role of the eighteen realms involves what a number of people said to me at lunch time – they said that the food was delicious. So good, they said, that the people who cook should open a restaurant. But there are a number of questions that involve their judgment. Who tasted the food? What was being tasted? What was experienced?

When people taste food, it means, of course, that they must use their tongues, the organ of taste, to have a sense of the food. What they sense is the object of their taste. Finally, there is the consciousness of taste. Whenever we are aware of anything in this world, any phenomenon, it is always as a result of three factors coming together, a sense organ, a sense object, and a sense consciousness. Thus we say that these three factors constitute the necessary ingredients for the awareness of any event.

The section of the sutra that we will discuss today focuses upon these three factors as they relate to seeing, vision. In this case the three factors are the realms of the eye, the object of seeing (which is called "form" in the sutra), and finally the consciousness of seeing. Now the question is: what are these three realms? Are they really as distinguishable from one another as they first appear? Could there be something of form in the eye organ? Is consciousness contained in the eye or in form, or do they both contain consciousness? Are the boundaries clearly drawn? If one factor pours, so to speak, into another, perhaps they should not be called separate "realms." There would then be no set boundaries to allow us to distinguish where one ended and the other began.

There are other questions to ask about how "distinguishable" these realms are. In one sense they must be regarded as separate, independently existent, no possibility of interaction. After all, the eye and what the eye sees are opposites. They cannot reach each other; they are separate. However, if you believe that they are separate, when you open your eyes, you find that they are in contact with one another and seeing occurs. Thus we clearly have interactions. Therefore what we think of as an eye and its object and eye consciousness are not truly separate. They have no real, unchanging, independent existence, and thus, according to Buddhadharma, they are only illusory.

Are the things that we see with our own eyes real or not real?

Do they have true existence or not? Let us consider various situations in which the act of seeing occurs. For example, a short while ago I saw a child riding on his bike outside the Center. If the child was in fact there, you cannot say that what I saw was an illusion.

Another example: Patrick's wife is not here today. Of course, when he returns home, he will see her. But he cannot go up to her and say, "You're just an illusion, a figment of my imagination!" She would think that something serious had gone wrong with his mind. She might want to have him institutionalized!

Look at how important the mind is when we see. The other day someone left a bag in the reception area here at the Center. My first reaction was, "Hey, this must be a bag full of money." It turned that there was indeed some money inside, but it was not stuffed with five dollar bills as I had imagined. Why was idea the first thing that came into my mind? Another person may have thought something entirely different about the contents of the bag. Someone else might have thought that it was packed with books or someone's lunch. It all depends on an instantaneous reaction in the mind at the moment. Thus each time Patrick goes home to see his wife, he might have a different reaction.

Let's use a rabbit as another example of how differently the same thing can be seen by different people. If a child sees a

rabbit, he may think of rabbits that he has seen in one of his books, and conclude that it is really very much like a person; that it can talk and play with him. A doctor or medical student may look at the same rabbit and see an ideal specimen for dissection. A gourmand might think of a particular kind of rabbit stew: greasy, crispy, and delicious.

One particular sight may engender a multiplicity of images or psychological reactions in different observers. When we "see" something, we don't really see the true object itself. What we end up seeing is a psychological reaction added or superimposed over the true thing.

How, then, do we understand something as true or untrue? If we use the rabbit as an example, one way of looking at it is to say that it has a true existence, but it is only our perception and our thinking about it that is erroneous or illusory. Or we may say that the rabbit itself is illusory and apart from the truth because it does not have a permanent, unchanging existence.

What is the proper understanding? We should not attach too much significance to finding an answer. It is not important to talk about actual physical phenomena, like the rabbit or our environment. Making these distinctions leads nowhere. Falling into either one of these intellectual traps does no good, and only leads to vexation.

The purpose of Buddhadharma is to free us from vexation. If we can learn to look at the world from the clear perspective of the eighteen realms, then we will see that it is really unnecessary to suffer from vexations, because they derive from illusory perceptions in our minds.

The sutra adds that even the eighteen realms are illusory and without true existence. After all, they are only conventions used to break down reality into various categories. Nonetheless, the sutra continues, the eighteen realms are in fact identical with the pure undefiled, unchanging True Suchness of Buddha Nature!

This seeming paradox can be explained by distinguishing between different points of view. For ordinary sentient beings the functions described by the eighteen realms can be a source of vexation. They can lead us astray. But those who are enlightened, those who have reached Buddhahood, do not have to free themselves from the eighteen realms. They act within the eighteen realms unfettered by vexations. Such perfected beings perceive that the eighteen realms are neither separate nor different from Buddha Nature, or True Suchness. They perceive that the Dharma Body of all Buddhas has always been within these eighteen realms.

Take the example of a mother and a daughter. If the daughter attains Buddhahood, how will she look at this world? Will she turn to her mother and say, "This is just illusory sense

data; this is not a mother." Would this seem proper? Would she act in this way?

Another example: one of our members owns a restaurant. If she attains Buddhahood, will she turn to her customers and say, "You are all nothing but illusory sense data. You are of no importance to me"? Would we be able to go to her restaurant and help ourselves to whatever we wanted without paying? Imagine what her son and daughter would say! They would come over here in a rage and cry, "Shifu, what have you done? Our mother is driving the business right into bankruptcy!"

But let's return to the eighteen realms. When you first encounter something or someone, what is the first thought in your mind? Is it one of greed? Hatred? Indifference or neutrality? If we react with greed or hatred, then, yes, we will give rise to vexation. But if we react with neutrality or equanimity, then vexation will not arise. We simply note that something has occurred. We are aware of it. It is part of our experience, no more, no less.

If you misunderstand what the *Shurangama Sutra* is teaching, then you might conclude that you can simply go home and forget about your parents, your children, or your spouse. That would be most unfortunate. Shakyamuni Buddha would really weep to see the Dharma fallen to such a dismal state.

Let us go back and examine a few of the different reactions towards the rabbit. We discussed the child, the doctor, the gourmand. How can we describe their mental states? Were they filled with greed or hatred? Or both? Or neither?

The gourmand might react to the rabbit by thinking about it cooked and lying on a platter. He might even begin to drool. Greed might also be involved in the doctor's reaction. He might think of dissecting the rabbit and discovering something new. He might see the rabbit as something that would further his career.

Another person might have a neighbor who kept rabbits whose feces were particularly foul-smelling. The stench might have driven him to the point where he was obsessed with resentment towards his neighbor. The sight of any rabbit might remind him of this, and set him off thinking about the decline of his neighborhood.

I once took a walk with someone who just had a terrible quarrel with his wife. They were at the point of divorce. As we walked, any woman that this man saw put him in a foul mood because all women reminded him of his wife.

The opposite scenario is possible, too. A man in love may look at any young girl and think that she is attractive because he is in a good mood and has only pleasant feelings for his beloved.

What the *Shurangama Sutra* shows is that the mind does not simply perceive, but rather it adds its own emotions and perceptions. If a sense organ, say the eye, only perceived what is in front of it and gave rise to nothing but seeing, there would be no vexation. It is only when we add to this initial direct perception feelings of love, hate, desire, or greed, among others – that vexations arise. The sutra advises us to only give rise to that natural, direct response. When you see something, your first reaction should be to see exactly what is before you, not what your mind introduces. If you can accomplish have this – have your mind respond only to perception then you will be in accordance with Buddha Nature because this is an undefiled state of purity. This is indeed within the eighteen realms, so you can see that if properly understood, there is nothing within the eighteen realms that should engender hate or greed.

From the standpoint of the eighteen realms, what is a rabbit? A rabbit is just a rabbit unencumbered by any idea that it is edible, delicious, or distasteful, or that it is a friend or just a dirty animal. There is simply the unadorned, naked perception of a rabbit. There is no sense of liking or disliking.

In such a state as this, does mental activity occur? Yes, there is mental activity. The mind remains active, but sense data do not create disturbances in the mind or give rise to vexations.

For example, you may go to a department store and browse

for hours. When you come home, what would you remember having seen? One person might remember seeing a lovely little puppy. Another might remember a fur coat. Someone else might have remembered a handsome suit or unusual tie. But for all the time that you may have spent in the store, you may not remember too many other things than these few I mentioned. Of course, before you went there, you had an idea of what you wanted to see and what you wanted to buy. When you saw those things, they made an impression on you. Other things in the store for which you had little interest may have passed before your eyes, but they did not register. They had real existence for you. It is as if you never even saw them.

Thus what you remember is a small percentage of you have actually seen.

We often look without seeing. Why is that? It is because the eye consciousness was not functioning at that time and in that place. You may look at something, but if the eye consciousness does not register the event, it will have no reality and you will have no memory of it.

There's a Chinese saying much like the English, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." But in Chinese it runs something like, "the one you love will appear a beauty to you." Where does this love come from? Is it inborn or acquired? A common viewpoint in psychology is that the affinity or tendency for certain feelings to arise toward another is developed

in infancy. But according to Buddhadharma, this is only partially correct because the accumulation of causes which results in this affinity is primarily developed in previous lifetimes. In these previous lives you might have fallen in love with a certain individual whom you might meet once again in this life. Once you meet, you may be immediately drawn to this person and find it difficult to leave him or her. This it called the fruition of previous karma. If you have never had such an experience, it may be that you were a monk or a nun in a previous life.

Why is it that you may look at something and instantly be filled with strong desire or loathing, and someone else may look at the same thing with no reaction at all? There is, of course, some influence from one's surroundings and upbringing, but the most important factors come from karmic seeds that were planted in previous lifetimes and whose consequences come to fruition in this life.

I mentioned earlier that it is the lover's eye that makes the beloved beautiful. This principle really applies to every one of us. We all carry a pair of gasses – karmic glasses – that we have brought from our previous lifetimes. What kind of glasses we have depends on the karmic seeds we planted previously. Whatever psychological reactions we may now have to things, events, and people, and all of our feelings and judgments – are all colored by the karmic seeds we carry with us from previous lifetimes.

Of course these seeds are affected by what we do now. If, for example, we bring a pair of lover's glasses to this life and we continue to plant the same kind of karmic seeds, we will only enhance, or at the very least, continue this tendency. On the other hand, if we try to free ourselves from these karmic burdens and at the same time we practice Buddhadharma, we will be able to gradually lessen the distortion in our karmic glasses and gradually see reality as it is. Otherwise, if we continue to generate the same karma as we have, the glasses will never lose their distortion and it may, in fact, grow worse.

I'm going to return to some of the lines in the text now. It is when the eye and its object, form, come together that eye consciousness arises. But on the other hand, it is only because of eye consciousness that one can be aware of the eye itself and, subsequently, what the eye sees.

Previously, I explained the meaning of "realm" as a boundary, or a point of definition. Each of the three realms – eye, object, or consciousness – can be taken as the boundary, as the point of definition. We can say that without the form, something to see, the eye and eye consciousness would be irrelevant. Thus we can argue that form is the pivotal point of the relationship. But if there were no eye, we would not be able to see anything, nor would any consciousness arise. Thus we can argue that the eye is the point of definition, the boundary. Likewise the eye consciousness can be presented

as the pivotal point in the interaction of these three factors.

From another perspective we can say that none of these realms has true existence. For example, if the eye is cut off from the object, it is clear that the eye itself cannot manufacture what is seen. If form or color is not present, it cannot see form or color. The eye alone does not possess form or color – there is no green or yellow or red or white to see within it. If the eye is separated from its object, then it cannot function as a "seeing" eye. Even if you add eye consciousness to the eye itself, without something to be seen, it will not see. Thus having only two of the three factors is insufficient for the function of seeing to occur. In other words, the eye cannot function as an organ of sight, without form and consciousness. Likewise neither form nor consciousness alone can cause seeing to occur without the presence of the other realms.

Let's concentrate on the object of seeing, form. If we use this object as the starting point for our argument, then we can show that it and the two other realms, the eye and eye consciousness, have no true existence. Color cannot be known without an eye to see it and an eye consciousness to interpret it. Since the colors are not within the eye or the eye consciousness, we know that the eye, eye consciousness, and colors must exist simultaneously before seeing can occur. Thus we say that the colors themselves cannot have true existence, because they cannot exist independently.

If consciousness remains unchanged no matter what mental state we are in, yet we see the same thing differently in different situations, what we see cannot have true existence. If we always saw things as they were, unaltered by our mood, then what we saw would always be real. But this is not the case until we reach enlightenment.

Now the question is raised: how exactly does our mental state affect what we see? Does eye consciousness change with our mental state? Or is it the mind itself, our sixth consciousness (our thoughts, memory, or imagination) that changes? In fact, for there to be a cognitive function (that is, for us to note or think about something we see), eye consciousness must arise together with the sixth consciousness. Otherwise, there is just isolated consciousness, and that is not what we refer to here. So indeed it is our mental consciousness, the sixth consciousness that changes and affects what we see.

What about space and time? These, too, are concepts which exist only in our mind. They exist by virtue of the eighteen realms. Apart from them, space and time have no true, independent existence.

Here is another question. How do the three realms function for a blind person? How can there be sense objects if the sense does not function? Is there no space and time for someone who is blind?

The other senses may function perfectly well in a blind person. Even someone born blind still has a kind of subconscious vision that results from sense data drawn from the other sense organs. When a blind person holds or touches an object or hears a sound, a certain sense of form develops in his mind. Thus someone who is blind may come to have a sense of what is round, rectangular, etc.

We have said that the eye does not have true existence by itself. We have said that the object seen does not have true existence by itself. Finally, we must conclude that even the eye consciousness does not have true existence by itself. If they do have true existence where do they exist and what is their relationship? Do the eye and its object reside in the eye consciousness? We cannot say. We can only conclude that when these three realms come together, seeing occurs. But individually none of these three has true existence. They are only illusions. Aware of this, we should not let these illusions give rise to such feelings as greed, hatred, desire, resentment, or anger; all of which amount to nothing more than vexations.

Thus we say that these three factors are illusory and apart from the truth. Only when we truly see, truly experience the illusory nature of these three factors, will we be in touch with the True Suchness of Buddha Nature.

The Eighteen Realms

May 3, 1987

As you may remember from an earlier lecture, the eighteen realms refer to the sense organ, sense object, and sense consciousness of each of the six senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and thinking. Note also that the Chinese word for "realm" has more than one meaning. It can mean "definition," "specification," or "domain," as well as "Dharma Body," "phenomena," or "activity."

The *Sandhinirrnochana Sutra* (*Sutra Expounding the Subtle and Deep*), has a passage that helps elucidate the idea of "realm." These realms, the sutra states, derive from time without beginning. All dharmas are rooted in and spring from them. In the context of these realms rebirth occurs, and the attainment of nirvana is possible.

The eighteen realms encompass what is called dharmas with outflow (samskrita) – relating to samsara, and dharmas without outflow (asamskrita) – relating to that which enables us to be free of samsara and attain liberation. When we talk about the eighteen realms, we recognize that they are involved in outflow, that is, one who is caught within them is in the realm of samsara. Viewed in this way, the eighteen realms are malevolent: because of them sentient beings are reborn again and again, fettered to unending life cycles. On

the other hand, it is here that practice begins. It may be that we are in samsara, accumulating karma and struggling from rebirth to rebirth, but the eighteen realms can also serve as the path to liberation.

The first chapter of the *Abhidharmakosha Shastra* by Vasubandhu stresses the importance of the eighteen realms. We are told here that all samsara, sentient beings, Bodhisattvas and Arhats, and even Buddhahood derive from them. Thus the eighteen realms comprise the most fundamental theory of Buddhadharma. Actually they are the most fundamental phenomena in Buddhadharma, and the theory is of course derived from them.

As we have seen, the eighteen realms can be divided into six sets of three. The first set is composed of the sense organ of the eye, the sense object (what is seen), and the eye consciousness that arises from the interaction of organ and object. The remaining five sets of three are hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, and thinking.

What the eye sees is what we call form. The word is used in a very general sense. It can refer to a thing or the way in which something is physically manifested: color, shape, texture, etc. This includes red, white, green, blue, etc., and long, short, square, circular, etc., and rough, smooth, etc., as well as other characteristics that the eyes can distinguish. These are all considered aspects of form.

There is yet another kind of form or phenomenon which can be either visible or invisible. It is not necessarily associated with a particular shape or color. This is called avijnapti-rupa, which can be a kind of power or energy. Thus the following might be considered form: breaking glass, an explosion, a tree uprooted by the wind. What is seen? It is not form as we usually take it to be. Nevertheless, there is something there to be perceived. Thus it can be categorized as form. We cannot say that they are simply color or shape, long or short. Such phenomena are subsumed under the category of object of the sense organ of vision. What is derived from the coming together of organ and object is a consciousness that incorporates distinction, recognition, and understanding. This is eye consciousness.

The next paragraph describes the sense organ of hearing, the ear, and its object, sounds. These in turn give rise to the consciousness of the ear. The paragraph on ear consciousness is much like the one on eye consciousness. Similar questions are asked: Is the consciousness of the ear real or not real? How does it arise? Where does it come from? We use our ears to listen to sounds and then we know what we have heard. We know the sound of a telephone ringing when we hear it. But how is this possible? How do we know that it is the sound of a telephone? Where does this knowing reside? We have the ears, the sound, and the knowing. The ears are on our head, the sound outside somewhere, where, then, is the knowing? Do these components have a separate, original existence?

For example, a sound that nobody hears is not a sound. Sound cannot be separate from hearing. The understanding or knowing of the sound cannot just be in the sound itself. Even if someone is present but fast asleep, a sound may not register in his mind. The organ of the ear is present, but in deep sleep, there may be no awareness of sound. Thus the recognition of sound is neither in the sound itself nor in the organ of hearing alone. Where does hearing lie?

Neither sound alone nor hearing alone, will give rise to ear consciousness. Only the combination of the two components can give rise to hearing consciousness. But is this really true? In our previous example of a person asleep, we saw that although the ear is present and a sound may occur, hearing does not occur. By the same token, a dead person will not hear the loudest sound, even though both his ears and the sound are present. Where, then, does hearing consciousness reside and how does it arise?

Can we say that there's no such thing as hearing consciousness? No, because it is obvious that when we are awake and our mind is clear, hearing consciousness functions. Hearing consciousness exists, but it has its basis in the sixth consciousness, which is the mind (mana). Actually all the five consciousnesses rely on the sixth consciousness. So the sixth consciousness has two different functions: first, thinking, considering, discrimination, and distinctions; second, it serves as a substratum which connects the

past, present and future. It is karmic force. (Note: In later Buddhism this second function of the sixth consciousness was attributed to the eighth consciousness.) It is for this reason that we speak of the sixth consciousness, the mental consciousness that arises with the functioning of any one of the five sense organs.

There is an analogy to illustrate this: a monkey, the sixth consciousness, is in a room that has only five windows. Each window is comparable to a sense – eye, ear, nose, tongue, and touch. Whichever window the monkey looks out of determines the kind of mental activity that arises as well as the consciousness associated with that particular sense organ. With this understanding, we can see why it is not accurate to speak of an independent existence for the first five sense consciousnesses. It is only when the sixth consciousness functions together with the five sense organs that we designate an eye consciousness, an ear consciousness, etc.

At this point we can argue that since the five sense consciousnesses have no separate existence, there is really only the sixth consciousness. Later when we come to the mind itself we will even refute the existence of the sixth consciousness. But that comes later. As far as we've come, we should note that the *Shurangama Sutra* proposes that the eighteen realms have no genuine existence. But to say that they have no existence at all is also incorrect.

This is because ordinary sentient beings take the existence of these eighteen realms to be self-evident, clearly existing, and possessing genuine substance. Ordinary sentient beings are unaware of the possibility that these eighteen realms are insubstantial and nonexistent. When they hold on to the idea of genuine existence for the world of matter, the senses and the mind, they generate a myriad of karmic causes and give rise to any number of reactions to the world, such as love, hatred, sadness, happiness, suffering, clinging to gain, avoiding loss, pursuing another, or running away from someone or something else.

However, too strident a view of the non-existence of the eighteen realms is not advised. This might lead to a belief that life is not worth living. We would feel that any involvement with the world would lead to nothing more than vexation. We would lose our interest in everything and everybody.

Next Sunday, for example, we will celebrate Buddha's birthday. We will have many flowers, beautiful decorations, and special food. There will be a rich array of visible phenomena. If we believed that everything we will see is simply one more vexation among the eighteen realms, why would we bother with such a celebration?

Last Saturday, a member of the Center approached me with a question having to do with sound and the teaching of meditation. He has been visiting a prison regularly and

teaching meditation to the inmates. But he is not the only one teaching the inmates. There are many others – Christians, Moslems, and there are groups organized around music, dance, and exercise. Our member said that the inmates he teaches find the noise and bustle of the other activities around them very distracting. There is loud music and feverish chanting and the stomping of feet. What, he asked, can he do about it? I said that in the midst of all that sound, he could help his students attain concentration of the mind or even samadhi through chanting. Chanting Amitabha Buddha's name, for example, is a useful method to reach samadhi.

Even though we may think of sound as something having no true existence, nonetheless we can still make sound an instrument of practice. Sound is not really such a terrible thing after all. In much the same way, when we offer flowers to the Buddha, the flowers' fragrance is a medium through which we make our offerings to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Lesser beings, such as deities and ghosts, feed on the aroma of the food. Once again, the fragrance or aroma may not have true existence, but it is instrumental in making the offerings.

Someone just asked how I know that deities and ghosts have a nose consciousness that can appreciate fragrances and aromas. I am certainly not a ghost. I have no personal knowledge of what consciousness ghosts have or don't have. On the other hand, the woman who asked this question is not

a ghost, either. And I doubt that she knows what ghosts are aware of.

What is important here is that my comments are based on the sutra, not my own speculation. The Buddha speaks of ghosts as having consciousness. This is evident in the descriptions of samsara as divided into the three realms of desire, form, and formlessness. The word "realm" appears here, also, but it has a different meaning from that of the eighteen realms we have been discussing. In this case realm refers to the categories into which all sentient beings can be classified.

The lowest of these realms is that of desire. Human beings fall into this realm. Here all six sense consciousnesses are present. Above the desire realm is the realm of form. This realm is associated with four states of dhyana (meditative absorption). As one progresses up from dhyana state to dhyana state, sense consciousnesses begin to fall away. By the second dhyana level, only the consciousnesses of the eye, the ear, and the body remain. At the third level and above only the mind consciousness remains. The previous five consciousnesses are non-functional.

Thus we can be certain that all beings in the realm of desire have six sense consciousnesses. Some beings may be different from us – their bodies and sense organs might be more subtle than ours. Nonetheless, they still have bodies and sense organs. The realm of desire, then, contains human

beings, deities, and ghosts. Thus we know that the ghosts or deities around us have six sense consciousnesses.

Those who are in the habit of making offerings to ghosts, special deities, or to their ancestors may find that the food does not taste very good once the offering has been made. It seems to lose some of its flavor. This is because the deities and the ghosts consumed some of the food's flavor and aroma when they accepted the offering. On the other hand if you make food offerings to the Buddhas, the food will not be affected because the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are not concerned about the flavor and fragrance of food. When we make food offerings to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we do it only as a gesture of respect.

In Asia a number of religions make it a practice to make food offerings to deities, and many adherents observe that the food seems to be less tasty after the offering. In this country there is no such tradition, so few people here have experienced this loss of flavor.

About two years ago there was someone in Taiwan who claimed to have the ability to communicate with the dead and the world of spirits. He came to my temple and complained that we were not feeding the ghosts enough food with our offerings. I told him that we only make fruit and flower offerings to the Buddha. If the ghosts want to eat, they must wait for the evening service when there is a ritual to give

offerings to various kinds of ghosts. They can only eat during that time. We don't provide food all the time for them.

Now if there's no tradition of feeding ghosts in the West, does that mean that these spirits are starving? It comes down to this: ghosts and spirits in the West recognize that during their lifetimes they made no offerings to the dead. Thus they expect none themselves. They are really on their own.

Someone just asked if these spirits can just wander into MacDonald's and feed on the aroma of a Big Mac. It doesn't work this way. If the food is not offered to them, they cannot just take it. It would be like stealing. They must go into the forest and feed on leaves or grass or the air. This is karma. The food that has not been offered to the spirits and the ghosts is not visible to them. They have no idea that anything is there. Thus it will probably not occur to Westerners to seek food after they die. They have no experience with the practice of offering food.

Now we'll read from the paragraph on the subject of smell. The idea expressed here is identical to that of the previous paragraph. We just substitute smell for hearing. This paragraph discusses the arising of smelling consciousness. Does this consciousness reside in the organ of smelling, the nose or in its object, fragrance or smell?

One point that the sutra makes is that it would be a mistake

to say that smell consciousness arises from contact between the object, a fragrance, and the nose itself as simply a fleshy, feeling extension of the body. This would really be in the realm of touch, the fifth sense, not in the realm of the nose organ at all. This alone would be enough to refute the independent, real existence of the nose organ. Because we would be talking about touch and this is about smell. The real existence of the body as the organ of touch will be discussed and refuted later.

Then the sutra explores the possibility that the smelling sense is transmitted through space. And if that were true, we would have to conclude that the organ of smell exists everywhere throughout space. The *Shurangama Sutra* shows us that the perception of smells as being good and bad gives rise to any number of mental activities. These give rise to moods and all manner of vexations, which in turn lead to an untold number of karmic consequences.

As in the discussion of the other senses, the *Shurangama Sutra* shows in its breakdown of the components of the sense of smell that the organ itself, all smells, and the associated consciousness are all interrelated. Thus they have no independent existence and are at base illusory.

Another point the sutra makes is that whatever we smell through our nose is not simply external to us, because our consciousness adds its own subjectivity. What we end up

smelling comes from within us. For example one person may find body odor repugnant but there are others who find it very attractive. I knew of someone when I was in the army who only sought women with very strong smells about them. I asked him why that was, and he told me that he didn't really know, but he surmised that it started when he was in love with a woman whose body had a very pronounced odor. Any woman with a similar smell reminds him of this woman.

Also, in Malaysia and Thailand there's a kind of fruit which is called durian. It has an exceedingly strong smell. People who are unaccustomed to it find it almost unbearable. But many people in Southeast Asia come to love the taste and, yes, even the smell.

These two examples illustrate that the sense of smell differs from person to person and from culture to culture. What and how we smell depend very much upon our mental state and previous karma. We may, for example, change our attitudes towards certain smells as we grow older, liking some we once disliked, finding other once-liked smells repugnant. Or a particular experience in this life or a previous one might determine how we respond to a certain smell.

Once there was a man who said he smelled an unpleasant odor, so he asked his friends around him if they smelled it, too. One of them said, "Oh! Your wife just came in." He asked her if she smelled it. She said, "Not at all. By the way,

how do you like my new perfume?" Not surprisingly, the man no longer complained of an offensive smell, and, yes, he found his wife's perfume very fragrant.

Even ordinary sentient beings can sometimes understand that what is perceived by the senses is illusory.

Taste and Touch

May 17, 1987

So far we have covered sight and sound. If you understand these two, you will find that the *Shurangama Sutra* deals with taste and touch in a similar way.

When the tongue comes in contact with food, taste consciousness arises. Where does taste come from? Does it come from the food itself? Foods have different tastes. Cane sugar is sweet, black plums are sour, rock salt is salty, ginger is spicy, lemons are bitter. If taste originates from food, then foods should be aware of their own taste. We know that is not true. Does taste come from the tongue? If it did, then the tongue should be able to taste even without food.

Common sense tells us that taste comes from the tongue's contact with food. If you suck on sugarcane, it tastes sweet and you say that sugarcane is sweet. But sugarcane alone cannot know its own sweetness. The tongue and the sugarcane must both be there.

To go further, we must understand a fundamental teaching of Buddhadharma: nothing exists outside the mind. All external phenomena are known only through our mind. The sweetness of cane sugar is a mental perception, a consciousness of sweetness. It is subjective. Would sugarcane taste the same

to one person as it tastes to another? We don't know, but it's doubtful that it would.

There are two ways to explain this teaching. First, we can take the perspective of the Consciousness Only school of Buddhism (Vijnanavada) which states that all of our past karma is planted like seeds in the eighth consciousness, a very subtle component of the mind. As causes and conditions ripen, these seeds manifest in various ways as external phenomena. So the external environment originates directly from the mind.

Second, we can look at this as Descartes did, who said, "I think, therefore I am." When our minds are clear, we are very much aware of the external environment and our connection with it. Because of this awareness, the outside world seems real; but when we sleep, or if we faint or die, the mind is no longer aware of the external environment. Thus, as far as we're concerned it is nonexistent. So the external environment exists only to the extent that we cognize it.

Everybody has a unique perception of the world. For example, assume you have a lot of problems and you feel very unhappy. You can't see any way out, and you cry for a long time until finally you fall asleep. But at the moment when you wake up, it seems your problems are gone, or at least they're not as bad as before. You see the world in a fresher, more positive way. Even though the external environment

remains unchanged, your perception and feelings about the world can change.

People often try to escape from their own subjective worlds by drinking or taking drugs. They want to be free from the vexations brought on by the environment, even if for a short time. Alcohol and drugs cut us off from the environment.

Where does taste come from? Does it come from the mind? Without food and a tongue, your mind won't register taste. In fact, the mind would not even exist without contact between the sense organs and sense objects. The mind is not the origin of taste, either. Taste requires the combination of food, the tongue, and taste consciousness. It cannot exist independent of the changing, mutual interaction of all three. Thus, taste is really an illusory experience.

Common sense tells us that our skin has the ability to perceive touch. Skin comes into contact with something, and the mind becomes conscious of touching it. Touch involves three components: the sense organ of touch (skin), objects of touch, and the consciousness of touch. There are two conditions that allow touch to take place: contact with or separation from an object. A hard object is pressed against you. It feels uncomfortable. If it is removed, you will experience a pleasant feeling. Uncomfortable and pleasant feelings both come from the sense of touch.

When I first came to the USA, I was surprised to see people shaking hands on the street. Good friends even hug or kiss each other on the cheek. In Asia people are more restrained and probably wouldn't feel comfortable being any more demonstrative than shaking hands. After I had been in the USA for a few years, I got used to this custom. It's quite sensible. People express their happiness at meeting each other by sharing the pleasure of physical contact. If two people are very close, any kind of contact can be very pleasant.

Our bodies have strong attachments. Buddhadharma tells us that the body is responsible for most of our vexations. For example, take two young brothers. One likes to sleep with the window open, and the other with the window closed. If the children sleep in the same room, they will quarrel. The first says to the other, "If you shut the window, I'm going to suffocate!" The other responds, "Don't leave the window open! If you do, I'll catch cold!" Even so, the problem isn't so bad between two brothers, because they can always get their own separate apartments when they grow up. But imagine if a married couple had this problem. The quarrel might end in divorce.

For those of you not yet married, you should make a detailed survey of your likes and dislikes and compare it to those of a prospective spouse. But even that might not work. Sometimes there seem to be no problems before marriage and in early marriage. But after time passes, body conditions

change and different preferences arise. When it's time for karmic obstructions to arise, they will definitely come. What can you do? The best thing is to stay unmarried. Become a monk or nun. If you want to get married, you must prepare yourself. At least one of you should be prepared to tolerate the other person.

People may have very different responses from touching the same object. For example, doctors commonly recommend sleeping on a firm mattress. But I am very bony and I don't have much extra fat. For me perhaps it's better to use a soft mattress. For someone with more flesh, a firm mattress might feel better. In my case the whole question is irrelevant because I always sleep on the floor. Whether I have a hard or soft bed doesn't make any difference. Nonetheless, there may be people so used to sleeping on a soft mattress that they would ache all over if they tried to sleep on a hard bed.

Sensitivity to touch can be changed with training. About 25 years ago in Taiwan, I went to visit an old monk who was practicing in the mountains. When I got there, I found that he didn't have a kitchen and had no implements for boiling water. "Don't you ever boil water for drinking," I asked. He said, "No, I just drink water the way I find it. I never boil water." "How about when you take a bath," I asked him. "I use cold water," he replied. "And what about when you cook?" He said, "I just eat raw food."

According to Chinese mythology, he said, people were originally very healthy. They ate everything raw. Consequently, their bodies became hardy and they were never sick. Then someone came along who discovered fire. People started cooking their food and began contracting diseases. It was only at that point that diseases needed to be classified and cures found. "Hah!" I said. "That makes a lot of sense." So I tried taking cold-water baths and right away I caught cold. I tried eating only raw food and I got diarrhea.

After that, I went to the mountains to go on a retreat. There were people there who cooked, so I didn't have to eat raw food. But there was no hot water, and from my prior experience I didn't want to bathe in cold water. So initially I just rubbed my body with cold water until it became warm. That made me feel in excellent condition, much better than if I had taken a hot water bath. Eventually, I started taking cold water baths, and I did not catch cold. So I was able to train my body. Then some years later, when I was in Japan, I noticed that there were cold-water public baths. After waiting some time, I finally decided to try them. I got a cold immediately.

The point is that the body can be trained to react differently to the same sense object or environment, but it's a slow process. Warm is not necessarily better than cold, or soft better than hard. Even though it can be trained, the body brings many problems. It wants pleasant sensations. It likes to rest. It doesn't like overmuch pressure. These preferences

lead to many vexations.

Where does touch come from? Not from the body alone. A dead person can't tell if something is soft or hard, cold or warm, smooth or coarse. Touch doesn't come from the sense objects alone, without the body. But everyone has a consciousness of touch. Does touch come from the mind? It is because of the mind that we decide to act, thereby creating good and bad karma. Without the mind, there could be no karma. But we discussed before that the mind could not exist without contact between sense objects and sense organs. So the mind cannot be the origin of touch sensation, if its own existence requires the objects and the body as a precondition.

So we return to the original question. The body, the object of touch, and the consciousness of touch are interdependent. None can arise without the other. So touch, like taste, has no independent, real existence.

The sutra next addresses the question: where does the mind come from? Before going into that, I would like to tell a story. There was once a disciple of the Buddha. One day, after begging for alms and eating, he started to practice walking meditation under the trees. As he was walking, he noticed another monk whom he recognized to be an outer path practitioner, not a member of the Sangha. This other monk had also recently eaten, but was not doing walking meditation. He appeared to be uttering various incantations.

Suddenly, out of his mouth came a magical flower, to which he said, "I've just eaten my Lunch. But I'm still not satisfied. I think I'd like to have some fruit." With that, various delectable fruits appeared magically out of the flower. The monk finished the fruit and then said, "Now I need some water to wash my hands and feet." There and then, a towel and a water basin filled with water came out of the flower. He washed himself and threw the basin and towel back into the flower, which magically absorbed them. Finally, the monk said to the flower, "I've finished my lunch, but I'm alone and I feel bored. I need some company." A very beautiful girl then appeared out of the flower, and the two began to enjoy themselves under the trees.

Witnessing this, the Buddha's disciple felt sad. He went back to Shakyamuni Buddha and told him what happened. The Buddha replied, "This practitioner may indeed have done what you say. But it is not very strange. Many of my disciples do just the same thing." Then the Buddha's disciple said, "No! No! Oh Buddha, your precepts are very strict and we try to follow them exactly. We would never do these things!" The Buddha responded, "Everything comes from the mind. So long as your mind moves, so long as it is affected by the environment, you are no better than the outer path practitioner. In fact, he is more advanced than you because he can produce a flower from his mouth which provides for him anything he desires. You can't do this."

Then the Buddha added, "That monk, though he appears to you as an outer path practitioner, is actually a great Bodhisattva. In performing those magical feats, he showed you the true nature of your mind." From that point onwards, the Buddha's disciple paid no more attention to the environment. He tried to reflect on his own mind.

The point of this story is that there is no external environment apart from your mind. The environment itself is a reflection of your mind. If things around you are going badly, it's because your mind is in a troubled state. If things are going well, it's because your mind is in a positive state.

Some of you may object to this. For example, say some gangsters came to the Chan Center to kill me. Is it really my own mind which produces the gangsters? Or say a woman gets raped. Did her mind really create the experience? Did her mind want it to happen? Of course, we cannot take this position. But since this story comes from the sutras, we should try to reconcile ourselves to it.

It is best to view unavoidable suffering or vexatious as the fruition of our own karma. If we take this standpoint, at least our vexations will be reduced, and the suffering itself will be more bearable. This explanation is consistent with the story also. Suffering comes from karmic seeds which reside in our own minds. Of course, we should try to improve our situation if we can. If someone approaches with the intent to

kill you, you shouldn't think to yourself, "This is the karma in my eighth consciousness manifesting, so it's OK that I'm going to be killed." You should try to save your life. On the other hand, if you face a situation you cannot avoid, you should recognize and accept it as your karma. Don't give way to vexations.

In the past series of lectures, we've discussed the nature of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. What the sutra has to say on the origin of the mind is really the most important of all.

Human, Hinayana, and Mahayana

June 7, 1987

The Buddha saw that Ananda strove not for his personal enlightenment, but the enlightenment of all beings. Thus Ananda was no longer interested in the shravaka or pratyekabuddha paths, which are associated with self-deliverance alone and are part of Hinayana practice. The Buddha then prepared to reveal the supreme Mahayana teaching to him. In doing so, the Buddha dismissed the concepts of causes and conditions and of self-existence which were familiar to Ananda. Ananda asked the Buddha to explain the truth that lies beneath these concepts. The doctrine of causes and conditions, taken to its extreme, suggests that all of your actions and everything that befalls you is predetermined. Self-existence, taken to its extreme, suggests that all things and events are random and unrelated. In the Mahayana teaching neither of these doctrines is considered to he ultimately true.

I will now go into some of the differences between Hinayana and Mahayana. When Shakyamuni attained Buddhahood, he began to teach the Dharma, and he found that those who listened to him had varying capacities to understand his teaching. Some people understand and enjoy Buddhadharma, sometimes from the first moment they hear it. Others have a harder time. Recently, someone came up to me and said,

"Shifu, I can't understand what you're saying about the *Shurangama Sutra*. I'm not sure that I'm going to continue to come to your lectures. This stuff doesn't mean anything to me. Why don't you talk about something relevant to daily life, instead of addressing scholars and philosophers?"

Buddhadharma can apply to all levels, from shallow to profound. The shallow level pertains to the kind of things the person I just mentioned wants to hear, things relevant to everyday life. Deeper is Hinayana Buddhadharma, in which one seeks his own salvation, leaving the cycle of birth and death. Deepest is Mahayana Buddhadharma, in which one seeks not only personal salvation, but the salvation of all others as well.

What is your level? You can find out by seeing how you react to the various teachings. If the Hinayana teachings seem complete to you and accord with your idea of Buddhadharma, then that is your level. If, on the other hand, your interest lies in the problems of everyday life, then yours is the common level of Buddhadharma. Hinayana Buddhism preaches personal salvation, deliverance of suffering for the individual. The Hinayana practitioner is not concerned with the salvation of others, yet he himself transcends suffering.

Do any of you worry about the end of the world? Many people are deeply concerned about this. The end of the world may come about by natural causes – a new ice age perhaps

– or by man-made causes – a nuclear holocaust. Some worry that the depleted ozone layer will bring about an ice-age, and they are busy trying to prevent it. Is this a Hinayana or a Mahayana concern? It is difficult to say, because this is a world-wide problem. Is the concern helping the individual or the entire world?

Another example: next year I'll be sixty. In twenty years, when I'm eighty, perhaps half the world's population will be dead from the AIDS virus. After forty years, perhaps the whole human race will be gone. What if I thought, "Eighty years is fine for me; I don't care what happens after I'm gone"? Is this a Hinayana or Mahayana attitude? It is neither. This is the thinking of common people, who care only for immediate personal benefit and perhaps that of their children and their grandchildren. This can be called the human level of Buddhist teaching.

The second level, the Hinayana, refers to people whose concerns are not of this world. A Hinayana practitioner is not concerned about his past, his future, his body, his self, or anyone else. His purpose is to attain nirvana, the state of no birth no death. Once this is attained, he's out of this world and has no concern for it. This kind of teaching is other-worldly. It is active in regard to the goal of nirvana, but passive in regard to the world.

At the third level, the Mahayana level, the practitioner is not

apart from the world, yet neither is he attached to it. He is active in the world. So, we need to know if we are more Hinayana or Mahayana.

Most people belong to the first level. They belong to the world, and they look out for their own benefit. One who looks beyond this world, towards his own enlightenment can be considered to be on the Hinayana path. Mahayana may be thought of as a combination of the human and Hinayana levels. It is the level where one seeks one's own salvation, but is still concerned with what goes on in this world.

Yesterday, I lectured in Boston, and a professor came up to me and told me that he dislikes the world, but that he is too attached to it to make an effort to leave. Most people don't like the world. There are few people who are content with their lives, who say the world is wonderful and everything in it is perfect. Maybe only children would feel this way. Do you remember ever really liking everything in the world? As a child perhaps, but now as an adult when something good happens, you don't want it to end, because you feel that there are many unpleasant things in the world.

About thirty years ago there was an American who visited mainland China, and fell in love with it. He said, "All the Chinese wear the same clothes, and they seem to get along so well. They're so nice and friendly. They're wonderful people. I wish I could be one of them." He only stayed for

a week, and when he got back to America, he thought that by comparison America was flooded with too many material things and it was beset by unsolvable problems. He wished to go back to China, and he vowed that if he ever got back there, he would stay. Finally, he got his chance, but after six months, he was bored. Everything was the same. Day in, day out, nothing ever changed. He finally decided that the United States was better after all.

Many Chinese seem to think that the moon is rounder in America than in China. They believe everything is better here. They want to come here, because they think everyone's rich and life is easy. Many who do get here are disappointed. Things aren't the way they dreamed. Look at the Vietnamese refugees. They came to this country, but they still have problems and fight with each other. Even Americans who were born here fight with one another. There is no one who completely likes or completely dislikes the world. We are born into the world because of the greed in our minds, and because of this, even though we may dislike the world, we are reluctant to part with it.

In China there once was a grand minister who visited a monastery with a thousand monks. When they ate, they made no noise – the quiet would have been remarkable for one person, let alone a thousand. The minister felt he had come upon a place of great purity and tranquility, and he told this to the abbot. The abbot asked him to try to live at the

monastery for seven days. But the minister refused, and said he was much too busy. After he retired, however, he would try to come and see what it was like. The abbot said by that time he would be in no condition for strenuous practice. It is one thing to admire someone; it is quite another to actually attempt the same lifestyle or accomplishments.

Look at the typical relationship between husband and wife. You may see a couple who help one another and who enjoy each other's company; and you may admire their relationship. They may appear happy on the surface, but almost all of the couples I have talked to say that they really feel that their marriage is not that great. Even so, they remain married and endure the pain they may give one another. Some couples tell me that they fight several times each week, or even every day. Or they may not fight but just sullenly avoid each other. Most couples bear these difficulties to a greater or lesser extent without breaking up. Some say that since they got married, they'll stay married. Sometimes one spouse will be so kind or so nice, that his or her faults can be overlooked. Nobody is perfectly satisfied all the time. Couples may not like what they're going through, but neither are they ready to throw it all away. This is human. This is the human level. Those who truly renounce the world are rare. Many dislike this or that about the world, but few really want to isolate themselves and practice seriously. This is really to say that there are few people at the Hinayana level. There are those who may be prepared to renounce the world and

become monks or nuns, but they secretly feel, "If I have the opportunity to get married, I would have to think twice about continuing serious practice." People who sincerely renounce the world and devote everything to practice are rare indeed.

Even in Shakyamuni's lifetime, people with the resolve of the Hinayana mind were very few. Today there are even fewer. In the Hinayana tradition the practitioner leaves the world, and lives alone in the mountains, vowing never to associate with lay people or people of the opposite sex. They single-mindedly seek deliverance from birth and death. They don't associate with people of the opposite sex because the man-woman relationship is the cause of life and death. Such practice is true Hinayana.

Generally, however, most monks and nuns dwell in the ordinary world. They continue to have contact with lay people and lay practitioners. These are the bhikshus (monks) and bhikshunis (nuns) of the world. They cannot be called Hinayanists because they are really following a Mahayana tradition. Shakyamuni encouraged his disciples to go out and ask for alms. This is a Mahayana action, because in doing this the monks and nuns establish karmic contact with people, and this is the way to future salvation.

A true Mahayanist is not concerned with his or her own salvation. The practitioner vows to attain Buddhahood, and takes the Bodhisattva path to this goal. Therefore, he exerts

himself to help others, to convert and save others. If the practitioner helps others to achieve true freedom, then he will have little vexation, although he is not concerned about his own deliverance.

For example, suppose Manhattan were sinking and you owned a great ship. Unconcerned with your own well-being or the chance of success, you take a great number of people on your ship, sail to safety, and you save everyone on the ship. Are you also saved? Of course, you, too, are on the ship. This is Mahayana.

Suppose, in the same situation, you felt that it would be impossible to fit all the people in Manhattan on your ship, but you decided to try anyway. In this case would your reaction be Mahayana or Hinayana? It would still be Mahayana, but a lower level than that of the previous example. This would be how a lesser Bodhisattva would act. In the first example there was no doubt, no intimidation. In this example the mind is not opened enough, the mind power not strong enough, so you would not be able to take everyone. In the mind the consideration still exists that the ship cannot hold all these people. A great Bodhisattva, however, would not consider how many people the ship can hold. He continues to take passengers until there is absolutely no room. You might comment that if he tried to get everyone on the ship, it might sink. If you think that way, you are a small Bodhisattva, not a great Bodhisattva.

A truly great Bodhisattva would think, "Manhattan is a great island, but my ship is greater still. The entire world is like a small balloon compared to my ship. Even the universe would not fill it." A true great Bodhisattva does not consider time or capacity. He does not think, "If I can't finish taking people today, I'll take more tomorrow." He doesn't consider things like this.

If we look at the text, we see that Ananda is confused by the Buddha's comments about causes and conditions. This is because Ananda is still thinking about time-bound cause and condition and space-bound cause and condition. This thinking is still within the Hinayana framework; it is not Mahayana. It is not the supreme truth, because any concept of past, present and future is still within Hinayana.

The *Shurangama Sutra* repeatedly emphasizes that the Dharma it speaks of is not the Dharma of causes and conditions, nor the Dharma of self-existence. According to Hinayana teaching, things do have causes and conditions and things may be spoken of as having self-existence. But these are not true Mahayana concepts. Suppose, for example, you were hit by a car as you walked down the street, and later you said, "It was an accident, isolated and meaningless. There was no reason for it to happen, it just happened." This is the doctrine of self-existence – events are random and unconnected. On the other hand, after the accident happened, suppose you said, "This was fate. There was nothing that I

could have done about it, even if I had looked left and right a hundred times before I started to walk across the street." This is the doctrine of causes and conditions. Most people believe in these doctrines to some extent, consciously or unconsciously. But the Dharma of the *Shurangama Sutra* is neither the Hinayana Dharma of causes and conditions, nor the Dharma of self-existence held by many non-Buddhists.

The Four Elements

June 14, 1987

In this section of the *Shurangama Sutra*, we learn about the four elements. In Chinese culture, there are two entirely different definitions of the four elements. Most Chinese people are acquainted with only one: drinking, women, money and wrath. You can easily pick these up from Chinese novels and plays, and they have nothing to do with the sutras. The four elements according to the Buddhist sutras are earth, air, wind and fire.

In Chinese the elements are literally called the four "greats." In the more popular definition, there is really no reason to consider the elements great, because they lead people to commit karma of a very serious nature. From this perspective, perhaps, it is correct to call the elements great, in that they are greatly hazardous. A monk should view the popular elements as empty; that is, without true, changeless substance; without true meaning. Why is this?

Drinking: When you're drunk, you lose self-control. You can commit murder or other evils. That's why monks are prohibited from drinking.

Sexual desire: This refers to "women" as they relate to monks and "men" as they relate to nuns. What happens

when the Sangha breaks the precepts? It creates scandals, which sometimes end up in the newspaper. A sex scandal lost Gary Hart the presidential election. His political career was ruined. He wasn't a monk, but if he had been, it would have been worse.

Money: Monks and nuns are not supposed to accumulate wealth. If a monk bragged about how much money he had, or the amount of his credit line, he wouldn't be much of a monk.

Wrath: Monks are supposed to be compassionate. A monk should be ready to accept and tolerate anything. He should maintain a kind demeanor, so that people feel comfortable around him. Of course there are various deities and Bodhisattvas that are sometimes depicted in wrathful poses. Monks, too, may appear angry in order to help sentient beings. Yet wrathful deities do not appear in monk form; they are different. If a monk does assume an angry appearance, you should not take his picture.

During the Buddha's Birthday celebration recently, many people took pictures of me with their families and friends. In all these pictures, you can see me smiling. If I appeared angry, people would not approach me. On Chan retreats I may appear angry, but we don't allow photographs.

It's easier to explain why the elements, as viewed in the

Buddhist tradition, are called "great." Taken together, earth, fire, water and wind account for everything in the world, including the environment and our bodies.

To be complete, however, we have to include two additional elements. The fifth is emptiness. The Chinese character for emptiness also means empty space, and both these meanings are indicated in the fifth element. Emptiness is meant because the first four elements are empty of any real existence. Empty space is signified because the first four elements must have a locus in which to intermix and form the world we see around us. The sixth element is consciousness, which is the only element which encompasses the mental realm.

We categorize these elements into the internal, referring to our bodies, and the external, referring to the outside world. Let's talk about the body first. What element do you think makes up our hair, our teeth, our muscles and bones, and our nervous system? Earth. The liquid element is blood, urine, and saliva. Even body fat can be of the water element.

A dead body grows cold even in summer. This means that the living body contains an element of fire, which keeps it warm even in cold weather. We can't identify any part of the body with the element of heat, but we know it exists.

Breath is associated with wind. There is a story in the sutras which recounts how the Buddha once asked his disciples,

"How long do you think life lasts?" Someone responded, "The average person lives fifty years." Some people answered twenty years. Then one disciple said, "Yesterday I saw a man very much alive, but today he is dead. So, life lasts but one day." At last one disciple said, "Life can end at any moment. Life lasts as long as the span of one breath; without the following breath, you are dead." Finally, the Buddha nodded.

Without the element of wind, there can be no life. A recent study said the average person would die within three minutes if he stops breathing. One Tai Chi teacher demonstrated that he could hold his breath for up to six minutes. Such ability is rare. Few of us could sustain more than four minutes.

Once, one of my disciples was using the breath-counting method of practice. He said, "It would be so much easier for me if I could simply give up breathing; then I wouldn't have to count anymore." I responded, "I can't help you with that."

The heart pumps blood through the body but how does it do this? In China we ascribe this to chi, literally "wind." Usually people who practice meditation find that their chi improves.

The external four elements: Everything around us can be divided into these four categories. Gold, diamonds, sapphires, rubies and other precious gems are of the earth

element. Of course rocks, bricks, grass roots, tree bark, dried wheat, soy beans are also of the earth element. In Buddhist classification, all these things, both precious and common, are no different from one another.

Once I spoke about supernormal powers: Some people can point to a rock and turn it into gold. People in the audience asked me if I would tell them more.

I said, "It really depends upon the person. There are varying degrees of accomplishment. There are some who can touch a stone and turn it to gold only momentarily. The stone turns to gold, but immediately reverts to its original state. Others can turn a stone to gold for a day, a month, or a year. Deities and Arhats can turn a stone to gold for 100 years or more. A Buddha turns a stone to gold for good.

Particular mantras develop the ability to change stones into gold temporarily. This might make you famous and people would think your attainments were greater than they really are, but you would be an impostor. In ancient China there was said to be a gang of people that gained mastery in this art. They cheated many people.

This is nothing more than changing one earth element into another. The element hasn't changed, even though it may look different. A stone is still a stone, even though someone has used his mind to make it appear as gold. An even greater

accomplishment is to make something out of nothing, or to make something that is cease to exist.

Once there were two people traveling on foot. One had developed transformative powers and the other bad not; they came upon a deep and wide river which blocked the road. There were no boats or bridges around and they wished to cross the river. So the one with supernormal powers picked up a leaf, blew onto it, and said, "This will be our boat." His companion looked and suddenly he saw a boat in place of the leaf. So they set off. Now, the man with the supernormal power felt tired, so he lay down and let his friend guide the boat. As soon as he started dozing, the boat reverted back to a small leaf. The other man began yelling to his sleeping friend, who immediately woke up, refocused his mind, and changed the floating leaf back into a boat. Supernormal powers do not change the basic nature of things.

The element of water: Anything with the property of wetness – water vapor, rain, rivers, the ocean. People and animals need water to survive. Water helps plants grow. With sunlight, trees create oxygen which further sustains life. However, too much of any elements is fatal. Great floods and forest fires are of course very destructive.

Earth, water and fire are visible, material things. Is wind also material? In a vacuum, or in outer space, there is no wind. Wind is the flowing of gaseous matter and therefore it is material.

Someone once proposed this odd idea to me: Hurricanes are a manifestation of the anger that fish feel when they are caught. Their souls have no chance to be delivered, so they travel around the sea angrily causing gales and hurricanes to avenge themselves. So, he said, if Buddhist monks say prayers and recite mantras, there would be fewer hurricanes.

What do you think? Does this theory make sense?

Student: Not to me. There are some oceans where considerably more hurricanes occur than others. The Pacific Ocean is stormier than the Indian Ocean.

Master Sheng Yen: Apparently, there's less fishing in the Indian Ocean. Or it may be that there's just as much fishing in the Indian Ocean, but the Indians work hard to deliver all the fish souls.

Actually, this may not be the world's most convincing theory. Buddhadharma, however, addresses this question in two ways. First, natural disasters like typhoons, floods, and great fires are the consequence of the collective bad karma of sentient beings.

Second, the fifth element, emptiness, is important in understanding the nature of such catastrophes. If we attach to a sense of self, we perform actions motivated by vexation, and we experience the karmic retribution of those actions.

On the other hand, if we are free of attachment to self, there's no karmic retribution because there is no self which can experience that retribution. There's no fear of disaster, no fear of death. All that remains are the four elements, and what harm can come from the interaction of the four elements, one with the other?

If the four elements seem real to you, you will experience the consequences of your previous actions and vexations will follow you day after day wherever you go. On the other hand, as soon as you perceive the four elements as empty, you are free of all vexation. That is liberation.

The Earth Element

June 21, 1987

Last Sunday I began speaking about the four elements, literally translated as the "four greats." Today we will concentrate on the first element, earth, and the question of its true existence. There are many descriptions and analogies given in this passage from the *Shurangama Sutra* that we are reading today, but they all point to the same thing: the non-existence of the element of earth.

The convention of dividing the world into earth, wind, fire, and water was common in many schools of philosophy and religion in ancient India. Our environment depends on the interdependence and transformation of these elements. All of them coexist at every moment. You cannot have three present and the other missing. It is for this reason that they are called "great": they are indispensable at all times.

Last Sunday, I mentioned the distinction between the internal four elements and the external four elements. As you may remember, when we speak of these four elements, we can talk about them as being inside or outside the body. However, the emphasis in Buddhadharma is on the four elements inside the body, which is a living form. These four elements are essential to the existence of all life forms.

Next the sutra discusses arising and perishing. We may have a simple understanding of these terms: we can understand that a newborn baby is life arising and someone in the act of dying is an example of life perishing. But with a deeper understanding of these terms, we can see that arising and perishing are applicable to both the baby and the one dying.

Ming-yee joked with me at lunchtime today. His birthday happens to be this month, so there was a birthday cake for dessert. Ming-yee said that with each birthday he removes one year from his age. He was just joking, but each birthday could be understood as one year closer to death. And we know that our metabolism functions in every moment of our lives. This involves a continual arising and perishing in every cell of our bodies. In this view even an infant undergoes arising and perishing. And even a person who is very, very old is in the midst of arising even as he is perishing. There is not as much difference as you might think.

This arising and perishing constantly follow one another. In the *I Ching* "creation" is expressed in the idea of "arising following arising." Little attention is paid to perishing.
This is, of course, a very hopeful way of looking at things. Nevertheless, arising and perishing always happen together and always follow one another. This process can be understood in terms of one's thoughts. That is, at any given time there can only be one thought in your mind. When the second thought arises, it means that the previous thought

must have perished. Someone involved in a great deal of thinking will have a swirl of thoughts passing through his or her mind, each arising and perishing. Like drops of water cascading over a waterfall, thoughts rush through our minds. But at any one point there is only one thought superseding its predecessor. This pattern is repeated endlessly.

There's another term that I would like to bring to your attention. It describes the smallest possible particle in the element of earth. It is termed, "the mote which is nearest to the void." It signifies a particle so small that if you could somehow manage to cut it down further, what you would be left with would be identical to the void. I asked Ming-yee how this accords with modem science. He said that according to older theories, matter could be subdivided ad infinitum. But contemporary scientific theories have rejected this infinite partitioning of matter. Indeed, there is much to show that beyond a certain point it is not meaningful to speak of particles.

But I wish to continue with the teachings of the *Shurangama Sutra*. The direction of contemporary science is certainly encouraging, and, who knows, someday theoretical science may advance to the point where it accords with the teaching of the sutra.

The next important term in the sutra, "Tathagatagarbha," is sometimes translated as "Tathagata Store." The word

"garbha" has the meaning of store in the sense of holding or keeping. What is stored is a Tathagata, a Buddha. Each one of us has a Tathagata Store. Each one of us holds a Buddha within, but we are unable to see the Buddha that is in our own Tathagata Store. When you practice to the point where you see into your own nature, the nature which you see into is your Buddha Nature, the Buddha of your Tathagata Store. Is the Tathagata Store here in my chest? No. The Buddha Store is not located in any particular point in your body.

If a human being is without this Tathagata Store, then it means he does not have Buddha Nature. If he has no Buddha Nature, there is no way for him to practice or be able to see Buddha Nature in himself. I just asked someone where her Tathagata Store is, and she said that it was in her consciousness. That's correct. In every single thought of ours the Tathagata Store is present.

There is a saying: every night you embrace the Buddha even when you are deep asleep, and every morning you pay homage to him when you get up. You have sought him for thousands of miles, but he sits right in front of you and you don't recognize him. What does this refer to? It refers to the Tathagata Store. We must first believe in the existence of the Tathagata Store before we can have the faith to practice and to attain Buddhahood.

There are two lines right after the words, "Tathagata Store"

that are very important, and I would like to discuss them. The first line says: "The nature of form is true emptiness." "Nature" refers to Buddha Nature or Dharma Nature. All form and phenomena that have manifested from Buddha Nature are, in their true essence, empty. This is the perspective of the Buddha or of one already enlightened.

But there is another saying, "True emptiness is not empty." That is, when we speak of true emptiness, we refer to the fact that nothing stays unchanged and that all things have only a temporary existence. Therefore, it is impossible to truly hold onto or attach to anything, because all things are always in a state of flux. The existence of phenomena is not denied, that would not be genuine Buddhadharma, but our ordinary perception of phenomena is illusory.

It is very easy for people to fool themselves about this point. It often happened in ancient China that people who suffered setbacks in their lives – a business failure, loss of wealth, unrequited love – would become discouraged and seek solace in a temple or a monastery. They would begin Dharma practice. Very quickly they would claim that the things that had made them miserable were no longer of any concern to them. But such attitudes were really only feigned. They would say that they had seen the emptiness inherent in all things, but in reality they still mourned their loss. They only wanted to put on a good face for the world to see. This is not true Buddhadharma. It is really sour grapes in a very subtle form.

Someone motivated to practice the Dharma, because they have been abandoned by a spouse, may later encounter their idea of a beauty queen or a knight in shining armor. The Dharma may not seem so important then, and they may feel that the world is not quite as empty as they had thought.

What is the proper understanding of emptiness? To understand emptiness is to look at something, and relate to it as it really is. If a man is married, he must realize that his wife is not simply an object he can put in and take out of his pocket at will. He does not control her. She has her own opinions. She is another sentient being. Both live together and take care of one another. Each one tries to fulfill the responsibilities of marriage. If the man worships her as a Venus-on-earth, then there will be a great deal of attachment to an existence that is not real. On the other hand, if he simply recognizes her as just another sentient being that he happens to live with, and if the couple tries to cooperate with each other, even if the wife decides to leave, the husband will eventually be able to understand and not harbor a grudge. In true emptiness you recognize and accept things as they are. The important thing is that as long as the two stay together, husband and wife have certain responsibilities and obligations that must be fulfilled.

Wealth is the same. If you have money, you should take care of it, and not squander it. But if your fortunes are reversed, you should not become overwrought. After all, wealth is

something outside of you. It has nothing to do with who you are. When you can maintain this attitude of non-attachment, then that is true emptiness.

Recently, two partners in a business came to see me. They started out as friends, but business quarrels brought them to the point where they were ready to kill each other. Each one complained about the other. As Buddhists, each of them knew that his complaint was an attachment, but what they argued about was so hurtful and hit so close to home, that neither of them could see a way out. How many of you have encountered situations like that?

What can you do? If you become angry enough to grab a knife and run after someone, you may get more vexation than you bargained for. But if it is really the case that setting eyes on someone makes your blood boil, why not simply keep your distance from him?

In this particular situation one person said that he did all the work, the other said that his partner took all the credit. When you reach a point like this, you must realize that you were enemies in a former lifetime, and enemies that meet on a narrow path cannot avoid one another. Now that the quarrel is out in the open, it is best to let it be. If you feel that you have suffered injustice, consider that you might have owed the other person something in the previous lifetime. Now he's getting something in his turn and you should not be so

terribly disturbed by it.

Both of these men still complained to me that the Chinese community was too small – they would not be able to avoid running into each other. I said, "When you meet, if he says hello, you say hello. If one of you looks unfriendly, that should not prevent the other from smiling. It makes sense that certain incidents will cause you unhappiness, but eventually you can get over them, and it will be like they never happened." Brothers and sisters fight all the time, but it is rare for them to carry childhood grudges into adulthood. They will always know, "This is my sister," or "This is my brother." Dharma practitioners especially should keep this attitude. Feelings of enmity are best recognized, defused, and resolved. There is no profit at all in maintaining them.

Let me now go on to the second line that comes after "Tathagata Store." The line reads, "The nature of emptiness is true form." When you experience emptiness you come to see that all forms, all phenomena have real existence. But it is important to remember that you must not attach to these phenomena, and you must not let them become a source of vexation.

We know that Shakyamuni Buddha attained Buddhahood at the age of 29 or, according to another version, at 34. The Buddha lived until the age of 80, so at the very least he lived here 46 years as the Buddha. What did he do during all those

years? He actively taught the Dharma, and it is because of his efforts that Buddhism exists today. If the Buddha had been discouraged and, like the people I spoke of in ancient China, had insincerely and temporarily embraced spiritual pursuits until things in his life improved a little, we would not be practicing as we do today. I wouldn't be here talking to you about the Dharma.

Thus if you really understand this line, "The nature of emptiness is true form," you would know the truth and importance of all phenomena. A person who has achieved this will not lose interest in the world and do nothing. On the contrary, such a person will work hard to fulfill his responsibilities and do whatever he can to help all sentient beings.

The sutra uses the element of earth to illustrate change, the continual arising and perishing of all phenomena. In your understanding of this, you must not fall into extremes. If you simply hold phenomena to be existent, this is wrong because phenomena undergo continual change – ordinary sentient beings have an incomplete understanding of what is real. Holding that phenomena have no existence is also inaccurate because change itself is a kind of existence, but once again, this is not easily perceived by ordinary sentient beings. Neither existence nor non-existence is strictly correct. Thus, in Buddhadharma our attitude is one of non-attachment to emptiness, non-attachment to existence. In this way we do not get caught up in phenomena, but we do not abandon

sentient beings, either. We practice hard and work for the good of all.

Let me return to the story of the two estranged business partners. One of them later asked me, "Shifu, how can you prove to me that I really owed my former partner something in a previous lifetime?" I said, "If you do not believe in me, there's nothing I can say. It has nothing to do with my opinion. It is the teaching of the Dharma."

In studying Buddhadharma, faith is very important. We should have faith in the teaching of the Buddha and the method of practice that he taught. This is very useful to us. Developing this faith is perhaps the only way we can approach the future with hope and contentment.

The Elements of Consciousness

November 15, 1987

I want to begin by talking about consciousness, because not everyone is familiar with what the term means, and there are many who have not heard of the sixth, seventh, or eighth consciousness. Consciousness can be understood as having three different forms, or aspects, into which are divided the eight levels of consciousness. The first form is the five sense-based consciousnesses arising from contact with the external world. The second form is that of discernment, which make up the sixth and seventh consciousnesses. The third form is the eighth consciousness, the so-called fundamental consciousness.

The consciousness of contact arises when the five sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, or body) come into contact with the five sense objects (what we see, hear, smell, taste, or touch). When sense organs come into contact with sense objects, the consciousness of contact arises. These are the first five kinds of consciousness and they are operative every day of our lives, so long as we are awake and functioning. When we fall asleep, the five consciousnesses no longer function at the same level as when we are awake.

Everyday, whether we are on the street or at home, wherever we are, we hear sounds and see things, but these contacts

do not necessarily leave deep impressions, nor do they necessarily cause us to react. For example, when I first came to the United States, I went to school everyday to study English. I traveled during rush hour, and I passed hundreds of people each day, some standing, some sitting, some singing, some yelling. They made little impression on me – I looked without seeing. But one time I met a Korean on the train, who I had at first thought was Japanese. I had just come over from Japan, and my Japanese was far superior to my English, so I thought that I might talk to him. He told me that he was Korean, not Japanese, but that he did, indeed, speak Japanese. This event made an impression on me. It is mental activity of this sort, where memory, discernment, or association is involved, that enters into the sixth consciousness. Things that just pass by our senses, that our minds do not dwell on, are in the realm of the five consciousnesses.

There are actually three kinds of sixth consciousness. The story about my meeting the Korean is an example of the first kind: the consciousness that arises simultaneously with the operation of the first five consciousnesses, when sense organ comes into contact with sense object. Thus I saw this man and heard his voice and developed an impression of him. This impression lies in the first kind of sixth consciousness. The important thing to remember here is that this aspect of sixth consciousness arises directly from the immediate environment – what you see, hear, taste, smell, and touch.

The second and third aspects of sixth consciousness are both called "isolated sixth consciousness." One type of isolated consciousness is that associated with dreams and daydreams. When you dream or daydream, your thoughts are unrelated to what you see and hear – thus your thoughts arise in isolation from your immediate environment. The other type of isolated consciousness is that which arises in samadhi – this, too, is isolated from your immediate environment.

The seventh consciousness is really a part of the sixth – it is sometimes called the "organ" of the sixth consciousness. Like the isolated sixth consciousness, the seventh consciousness is completely separate from the five consciousnesses. The key to understanding the seventh consciousness is in seeing how it maintains a sense of self-attachment. Yes, it is true that a sense of attachment to self can apply to the sixth consciousness, but this attachment is really to the things that manifest in the sixth consciousness from the outside world – this is "my book," this is "my country." It is an attachment of self to environment. However, the seventh consciousness channels attachment to the deepest sense of self – this is happening "to me," this is "who I am" – into the eighth consciousness. Thus the seventh consciousness acts as a kind of bridge between the sixth and the eighth consciousness. The seventh consciousness, in a sense, is kind of stupid in the way that it functions. Regardless of what you do, bad actions or good actions, everything that you do is pulled into the eighth consciousness with the idea

"this is my action." Without the seventh consciousness, there would be no boundaries defined for the individual. The seventh consciousness is the center of the ego consciousness. It is from here that sentient beings get their idea of self. But sentient beings are not aware of this seventh consciousness. By channeling our actions into the eighth consciousness, the seventh consciousness maintains the continuity of self that keeps us in samsara – moving from one lifetime to the next.

The eighth consciousness, the fundamental consciousness, is also known as "the continuously transforming consciousness," or "the seed consciousness." It is known as the continuously transforming consciousness because it maintains our continuity in samsara – from rebirth to rebirth, from realm to realm. It is the consciousness that follows us from one lifetime to the other.

The seed referred to in "seed consciousness" is a "karmic seed." What are karmic seeds? When we act, we create karma. Eventually, there will be reactions to our actions – karmic consequences. But before these consequences appear, the potential for them to manifest is contained in a karmic seed. There are three kinds of karmic seed – the virtuous seed, the evil seed, and the unmoving seed. Virtuous seeds come from good acts; evil seeds from bad acts. Unmoving seeds come from the practice of samadhi. We have created these seeds from the actions we have taken. The totality of our karmic seeds comprises what is called our

eighth consciousness. The seventh consciousness is called "the gatekeeper" because it guards all of the karmic seeds that lie in the eighth consciousness. It guards these seeds by maintaining a sense of self. The kind of karmic seeds we have planted determines what kind of rebirth we will have, and where we will be reborn.

How do karmic seeds eventually mature and become karmic consequences? It depends on what kind of seed dominates in the eighth consciousness. If, for example, the karmic seed for rebirth as a pig dominates, you will be reborn into the realm of desire as a pig. If unmoving karmic seeds dominate, then you will be reborn into either the form realm or the formless realm; you will not be reborn into the realm of desire. Beings are reborn in the realm of desire because either the virtuous or the evil seeds dominate.

How can Bodhisattvas be born into our world, which is in the realm of desire? Bodhisattvas come into this world through the power of their vows, not through the power of karma. They choose to come into this world. A Bodhisattva able to do this would have to achieve at least the first bhumi, so that he or she is no longer controlled by karmic seeds. As a Bodhisattva moves higher and higher in attainment, the seeds become less potent. They no longer mature, and when they lose all of their power, the Bodhisattva will attain Buddhahood. As far as practice for ordinary sentient beings is concerned, the attachment to self is the greatest obstacle

to liberation. Until this attachment is cut, you will be transformed again and again within the realms of samsara. It is in the sixth consciousness that a practitioner starts letting go of self. Eventually, diligent practice will cause the sense of self to drop away in the seventh consciousness, and finally the karmic seeds in the eighth consciousness will lose their power so that final liberation can be achieved.

Now that I have given some description of consciousness, I will discuss some of the points that are brought up in the passage on consciousness in the *Shurangama Sutra*.

There are three questions that are asked in this passage. First, how does consciousness arise? Second, what is the relationship between the element of consciousness and the other elements? Third, how is the element of consciousness related to the Tathagata Store – the Tathagatagarbha, the absolute in the midst of desires and passions?

The sutra first asks how consciousness arises. In the case of seeing, does it arise from the seeing (perception) itself? Does it arise from form (the thing that is seen)? Does it arise from empty space (neither form nor perception)? Or does it arise from no cause at all

How is sight perception possible? There must be a combination of conditions. There must be an eye to see, a sense organ. There must be something to see, a sense object.

There must be a spatial relationship between the eye and the object. If something were pressed up against your eye, could you see it clearly? And the proper light conditions must exist for seeing to occur. Thus there must be eye, object, spatial relationship, and light for seeing to occur. When all of these conditions are present, consciousness arises. But if we look individually into all of the conditions for seeing, in none do we have consciousness by itself. But when all of these conditions are present, we have seeing and we have the consciousness of seeing.

In ancient India there were two important schools of philosophy, which were diametrically opposed. One held that all things arise from causes and conditions, the other that all things occur for no reason. You might think that the views of the causes and conditions school were identical to those of Buddhism. However, there is an important difference. Those adhering to the causes and conditions principle, believe that these causes and conditions are absolutely true in and of themselves, that they are real dharmas. But when Buddhists talk of causes and conditions, we recognize that they are themselves empty dharmas having no real existence. Thus causes and conditions are really false concepts. Theists, in effect, follow the causes and conditions school, and they trace everything back to an original cause or a concept of a God. Atheists and pure materialists, on the other hand, are proponents of the no-causes school. Buddhism is something different, not altogether one school or the other. Buddhism is

not theistic – there is no recognition of a God as a final cause. And Buddhism views causes and conditions as only false names. On the other hand, Buddhism does not subscribe to the purely materialistic view that things arise with no cause. The *Shurangama Sutra* refutes both these schools by showing that the conditions for seeing, that I spoke about before, are themselves only false names, and that the idea that things arise abruptly, with no cause, is also false. In this way the *Shurangama Sutra* is closely allied with the Madhyamika school of Buddhism.

To show how the sutra answers the second question, "What is the relationship between consciousness and the other elements?" I must explain what the seven elements are, and how the sutra views them.

Usually we speak of six elements. These include the four elements, earth, fire, wind and water, which comprise the material realm, and to these are added empty space and consciousness – six altogether. Then how do we get seven elements? The *Shurangama Sutra* actually distinguishes two aspects of empty space. The first aspect has to do with discerning space by the presence or absence of substance within space. The second aspect concerns discerning space by the presence or absence of light within space. Thus space with its two aspects becomes elements five and six, and consciousness, which really incorporates all of the other elements, becomes the seventh. Thus to explain the

relationship between consciousness and the other elements, the sutra shows that consciousness is neither separate nor different from the first six elements.

When I say that consciousness exists in the previous elements, you may wonder if I am referring to the sixth consciousness, or the eighth. The sutra, in this particular section, would seem to refer to the sixth consciousness because this consciousness arises in combination with other factors, such as form, empty space, and light. In the eighth consciousness there is no need for such conditions. The eighth consciousness, by the way, is what is referred to by the Consciousness Only school. According to this school, everything in this world, in the universe, any thought or thing – arises from consciousness.

Some of you might mistake the consciousness that arises in combination with other factors, the sixth consciousness, for that consciousness which gives rise to all things, the eighth. This could lead to some misunderstanding. The eighth consciousness is, after all, what leads us from birth to birth, realm to realm. If you believed that the sixth consciousness had such power, then if you thought of something, it would simply come into being. If your discerning mind ceased functioning, the world would cease to exist. You could simply imagine a pot of gold, or a man could think of Snow White, or a woman of Prince Charming, and all of these things would instantly appear in the world. But of course we know that such things do not happen at will.

Is the *Shurangama Sutra* making a mistake? Is there some confusion in the text? No, when the sutra speaks of consciousness, it does not specify a particular level. The sutra takes consciousness to mean that particular thought which is in our mind anytime that our mind is moving. At any moment this thought incorporates the totality of our life from time without beginning to the endless future. The totality of our merits, virtues, sins – all our karmic acts for all time – are included in this single thought. The 3,000 dharma realms are included in this single thought. This thought, this consciousness, refers to our illusory mind, and the sutra goes on to show that this illusory mind, at any given moment, is not separate from our true mind. This leads into the discussion of the Tathagata Store.

Ultimately, consciousness here refers to the mind. This mind is not distinguished from the illusory mind or the pure, undefiled mind. All are contained in this mind. In this sense the *Shurangama Sutra* differs from the Consciousness Only school because the latter school clearly differentiates between the defiled, illusory mind and the pure, undefiled mind. The sutra makes no such distinction.

Now the third question. Is the Tathagata Store different from or the same as this consciousness? The answer to this is shown in a couplet that appears at the end of every paragraph that speaks of the elements. This couplet is not in Charles Luk's translation. The first line states, "The nature of consciousness

is a true knowing, or true illumination." This is to say that even though we may use various names for the elements – earth, fire, water, wind, space, consciousness – the true nature of these elements is the same as Buddha Nature. And Buddha Nature is the same as true illumination. Thus the nature of consciousness, like the nature of the other elements, is true illumination. The second line of the couplet reads, "Only when one realizes true illumination will one know what true consciousness is." If you have no realization of true illumination, you can only know illusory consciousness, not true consciousness. And true consciousness is the same as the Tathagata Store.

We have talked a great deal about consciousness. Perhaps we can consider this question: Is consciousness useful? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? What is bad about consciousness is that it allows us to create the three kinds of karmic seeds. If you create good or bad karma, then you stay in the realm of desire. If you create unmoving karma, then the best you can do is get into the form or the formless realm. Karma does not get you to liberation. But if you understand Buddhadharma, and if you practice freedom from self, then you will not create any of the three kinds of karma. Rather, you will generate karma without outflow – karma that has no self associated with it. Practice of freedom from self can lead to the Bodhisattva stage. Then if you come to this world, it will be to help sentient beings, not because of karmic retribution. For those of you who have listened to

these *Shurangama* talks, it is important that you practice. Even though you may think you understand what is taught here, you still have a sense of self – externally, the self of the sixth consciousness; internally, the self of the seventh consciousness. The practice of samadhi is not enough. It is also necessary to practice Chan; that is, the practice of wisdom together with the practice of virtue and merit.

The Sun in the Buddha's Mind

January 1, 1989

Purnamaitrayaniputra, one of Buddha's disciples, seeks to understand the difference between the Buddha's mind and that of ordinary sentient beings. He approaches this problem by asking the Buddha about the four elements: earth, water, fire and wind. He recognizes that these elements are mutually destructive. How can fire and water, for example, and the principles underlying them, exist together in the universe? Why do they not raise obstacles and hindrances to each other? Why doesn't one element triumph over another, or why don't all the elements simply cancel each other out?

The Buddha answers that in wonderful enlightenment, in the illumined mind, nothing is in contradiction. Everything is possible. Wonderful enlightenment refers to Buddhahood and the illumined mind refers to unlimited great wisdom. Even though the Buddha himself has no existence in the phenomenal world, everything in the phenomenal world can be contained in his illumined mind. The sutra gives an analogy to explain this: Imagine the sun in the sky on a bright day. Two men standing together by a river see its reflection. Then one man walks east; the other west. Each sees the sun in the water accompanying him as he walks. A foolish man will believe that the sun he sees is the real sun. A wise man understands that it is a reflection, an appearance.

There are two people in the sutra's analogy, each of whom sees a sun. But if there were a thousand people, they would see a thousand suns, all different.

This analogy shows that there is really nothing within the wonderful enlightenment and illumined mind of the Buddha, just as there is really no sun in the river. However, each sentient being within this wonderful enlightenment and illumined mind sees his own world, a world unlike anyone else's.

It was stated earlier in the sutra that because of their karma, sentient beings see the four elements of earth, water, wind and fire, and they see the mountains and rivers and the great earth. All phenomena they see are generated by their previous karma. But for the Buddha, who is free from karma, there is no such thing as the four elements, the mountains, rivers and great Earth. Only sentient beings believe that the Buddha sees these things as they do. But nothing exists in wonderful enlightenment and the illumined mind, so these phenomena do not manifest for him. Sentient beings, however, can only see and understand the Buddha in the context of what they can sense and know: the four elements, the mountains, the rivers and the great earth. But for Buddha these things have no reality.

Sometimes I am asked, "When someone attains Buddhahood, do they still exist?" But a more appropriate question is,

"What is it like to be enlightened?" This question causes us to reflect on the question of a self. We have heard that before enlightenment, you must pass through a stage of selflessness, or no self. We may admit that the sense of self has given us a myriad of vexations, but the idea of totally separating from self seems terrifying. What is it like to have no self? This is somewhat puzzling. In the sutras the Buddha continually refers to himself in the first person. When he first attained Buddhahood, he stated, "In the heavens and on the earth, I am the highest. I am the most worthy of respect." How can this be? It looks as if Shakyamuni Buddha still had a self if he referred to himself in this manner. If he has a self, then he necessarily had all the vexations associated with a sense of self. Is this true?

For Buddha, indeed, there is no self, but he must provide a "self"" or an "I," and therefore a "Buddha" that sentient beings can relate to and have faith in.

The limitations of language demand that certain conventions be maintained. This is why most sutras open with, "Thus have I heard." Ananda is the hearer. Although it cannot be truly said that something was heard, or that anyone heard it, this phrase affirms the actual occurrence of the sutra for sentient beings.

Once, just after a Chan retreat, I lost my hat. During the retreat, I had often spoken of having no self. When the hat

was found, and it was asked, "Whose hat is this?" I answered, "It's mine." The finder asked me if my response meant that I, too, had a self. I asked him, "If you were me, how would you have answered the question?"

Avy has an objection. She says that Chinese sometime use "someone" rather than resort to "I." It's true, on that occasion I might have said, "That hat belongs to someone." Then the one who picked up the hat might have given it to anybody. That wouldn't do. According to Buddhadharma, labels like 'you' or 'me' or 'self' or 'others' are really only provisional names. They exist only in a false sense. We may attribute existence to these false names, but it is only for the sake of convention. Otherwise, daily activity and normal interaction would be quite impossible. You may be at the level of selflessness, but how are you going to address your own father? Will you call him, "Dad?" Does that mean that someone with no attachment to a self is still attached to his father? Would calling him "this person" be better? No, it would be ridiculous.

The problem of being caught up with concepts and labels is illustrated by the story of a discourse given by a Dharma master. During his talk, he made two statements that sounded rather contradictory. First, he said that a mustard seed could be contained inside Mount Sumeru, the great mountain that stands at the center of the universe. Next, he said that Mount Sumeru could be placed inside the mustard seed. The

mustard seed is very small; Mount Sumeru is prodigious.

A scholar in the audience, who was also a high level government official, asked the Dharma master how this could be. He understood the mustard seed in Mount Sumeru, but he could not fathom the second statement. He said to the Dharma master, "I am of ordinary size, certainly smaller than Mount Sumeru. Can you put me in a mustard seed?" What do you think? Was the Dharma master claiming supernormal powers? How could he justify his statement?

The Dharma master said that not only can Mount Sumeru be placed in the mustard seed; in fact, all the Buddhas of the ten directions from the past, present, and future can sit on the tip of a fine hair. Taken aback at this, the official reminded the Dharma master, "You still haven't answered my question. Can you put me inside a mustard seed? And here you go changing the subject and making a statement that is even more unbelievable than what you first said!"

The Dharma master replied, "Honorable Sir, I've heard that you are very learned; that you have read in excess of ten thousand volumes." "Well," said the scholar, "ten thousand is really not that much for me. I probably have read two or three times that number." "Then let me ask you a question," the Dharma master said. "How large is your head? How can you hold so many books – numbering in the tens of thousands – in that head you have on your shoulders?"

We can say that memory is unlimited. It doesn't occupy space and it is not constricted by time. It is not like a magnetic computer tape that has a finite capacity. Until you reach a very advanced age, there seems to be no limit to what you can learn. Do you really think the scholar official found this argument convincing? I doubt he was really satisfied. Most likely, he wanted to say, "Let me see you do it. Put Mount Sumeru in a mustard seed right now."

Nevertheless, the scholar decided to let the matter go and said to the Dharma master, "Well, if my head can contain more than ten thousand books, in a certain sense I guess it may be reasonable to accept, at least by analogy, that a mustard seed can contain the whole of Mount Sumeru." But I think this scholar's reply was really quite foolish.

How can we understand this seemingly impossible statement? First, we have to understand how the mustard seed and Mount Sumeru look to the Buddha. Are they equal in size or is one bigger than the other? To the Buddha, they are the same. Why is that?

Pursuing such puzzles might seem to lead us into a blind alley. How can we fit Mount Sumeru into a mustard seed? This is not a question for the Buddha. From his perspective the mustard seed and Mount Sumeru have no individual existence. They are undifferentiated in his view. You cannot even call the mustard seed a "mustard seed" or call Mount

Sumeru, "Mount Sumeru."

Let's return to the sutra. We said that in Buddha's enlightened, illumined mind there is no such thing as earth, water, fire, wind; no such thing as mountain, river and great earth. This does not stop sentient beings from believing that they see these phenomena. As in the analogy in the sutra, the sun is not in the river, yet sentient beings will see it there and forget that it is a reflection. Buddha can help any number of sentient beings at any level at the same time, and each may believe that Buddha appears in this world only for his or her sake. This is because every sentient being hears or learns a particular aspect of the Dharma from the Buddha. This understanding is completely unrelated to what other sentient beings learn from the Buddha.

The *Vimalakirti Sutra* states that the Buddha expounds the Dharma from one sound. Sentient beings, according to their level, animal, human, etc., achieve a particular understanding. But when Buddha speaks the Dharma, he speaks an undifferentiated Dharma. He does not think of a particular sentient being or group of sentient beings. It is the karmic affinity of sentient beings themselves and their attainment which determines their understanding of the Buddha's teachings. It is only because of sentient beings, not because of the Buddha, that the distinction arose in later ages between the so-called Hinayana, the Lesser Vehicle, and Mahayana, the Greater Vehicle, and within that, the

distinction between the sudden teaching and the gradual teaching. These distinctions came into being only because of the varied karmic affinity, karmic roots, and karmic attainment of sentient beings who have developed different and sometimes conflicting understandings of the Dharma.

We may wonder if these distinctions exist in the Buddha's mind. Does he recognize the Hinayana or Mahayana, gradual teaching, and sudden teaching? Most of you say no, they do not exist for the Buddha. Then what is it we hear or what do we think we hear in Dharma talks? Isn't the *Shurangama Sutra*, the sutra I am speaking about now, isn't it something said by Buddha? Isn't it something that came forth from Buddha's mind?

We can equate the *Shurangama Sutra*, or any other sutra for that matter, with the sun in the river seen by ordinary sentient beings. Indeed, all the sutras of Buddha are comparable to the suns that people see in the water. That is why at the point of death, the Buddha cautioned that during the previous forty years he had not said a single word. Thus, when I am asked about specific Dharma questions during retreats, I say, "Avoid such erroneous thinking. Buddha never spoke Dharma. Just go and practice."

Often at the end or towards the end of a retreat, people tell me how helpful my talks were. They say that a particular comment here or there was precisely what they needed at

the moment when they were in greatest difficulty. It sounds as if I was specifically addressing the problems of the people on the retreat. It may sound like this, but it is really not the case. It is not that I am a Buddha, or that I speak an undifferentiated Dharma. I don't plan what I am going to say. I simply speak according to what I see as appropriate in the moment. I feel that I have to say something; otherwise I won't look like a master. I just speak some random words; that's all. In fact, I have told participants in the retreat that they need someone to say something. It matters little what I say. They will find almost anything useful according to their need and their attainment.

On retreat I emphasize how important it is to have faith in the master. If you feel that what I say is really something that you could devise with a little bit of effort, then what I say will be of no use to you. Maintaining the attitude that what I say is correct will help you progress on the retreat. Even Shakyamuni Buddha could not help you if you had no faith in him. That is why I say that Buddha does not want to speak the Dharma, but sentient beings want to hear it.

There are many, many sutras gathering dust on bookshelves, waiting to be read. One who has no faith may look over a sutra, but he or she will have no real interest in it. However, when those with proper karmic roots come in contact with Buddhadharma, they marvel at the subtlety and depth of the teaching.

Let's go back to the Buddha. Buddha never really plans or thinks about speaking any particular aspect of the Dharma, but sentient beings need to hear him. The Buddha responds to the needs of sentient beings. He does not speak out of his own needs. But as we said before, different sentient beings hear the Dharma according to their karmic roots and attainment. I see this on retreats. I will say something in particular and see that two people benefit from what I said, but each hears my words on a different level and benefits accordingly. That they each benefit does not mean that they will attain enlightenment or reach Buddhahood at the same moment. I simply say what I say and those with the need and the faith obtain the benefits according to their efforts and attainment.

Once a woman remarked to me how difficult it would be to match the compassion of Kuan Yin (Avalokiteshvara), who hears and helps sentient beings. She thought she would be overwhelmed if she tried to develop anything like Kuan Yin's compassion. I asked her why she had that attitude. She said, "I recently helped out a friend. But now he calls me up every day and every night, pleading how much he needs me. Helping him now means nothing less than marrying him. If I have so much trouble with one person, how could I even dream of being like Kuan Yin, who helps all sentient beings?"

I replied, "There's no problem. Kuan Yin is supposed to

have a thousand arms and a thousand heads. If someone needs her arm, she can just give it away. She loses nothing." The woman was not so sure: "What if a thousand people each want one of her arms? The Bodhisattva would run out of arms!" "It doesn't matter," I said, "A Bodhisattva can transform each arm into a thousand or a thousand-thousand arms. There really is no end." Nevertheless, the woman concluded, "It still seems to me that it must be very tough on Kuan Yin to respond to the pleadings of all sentient beings."

Do you think my answer to her was sufficient – that Kuan Yin can transform each arm into a myriad of other arms? This woman was afraid to pursue the matter further. What do you think?

Someone just said that the correct interpretation is that the Bodhisattva really does not help sentient beings. They find the answer to their needs within themselves, from their own minds. If this is the case, why do we bother to pray to or ask for help from the Bodhisattva? Another person answered, "Maybe sentient beings do not have enough faith in themselves, or in their own minds, or sufficient understanding of Buddhadharma, so they place their faith in a Bodhisattva whom they take to be outside of themselves."

Sentient beings must be helped by what they can understand; that which can reach them on whatever level they happen to be. There may indeed be nothing in Buddha's or Kuan

Yin's mind, but sentient beings can pray to them for almost anything. There is no limit to what they can ask for and what they can achieve through their own efforts. It is their merit and virtue that allows sentient beings to attain what they strive for. But if that is really so, why can't we realize our goals by simply calling out our own names? Why is there this need to pray to Kuan Yin? Why not just say, "Hey, me! I believe in me! I have faith in me! Let me have what I want." Would that work? Certainly not. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have illumined, enlightened minds. We do not yet. Until such time as we are enlightened, we must have faith in the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. An analogy would be trying to look at ourselves without a mirror. We need a mirror to look at our own reflection. No one can lift his eyes out of their sockets, turn them around, and stare at his own face.

Are there any questions? Avy just commented about my statement that the sutras will be useless to someone with no faith. She said that just coming in contact with the Dharma may plant a seed that will ripen at a later time. This is a good point. Someone else just said that I seem to be saying that faith is the most important thing, perhaps the only thing, necessary to resolve our problems. I would not say that. Faith is important, but it must lead to the accumulation of merit and wisdom.

Untying the Six Knots

December 13, 1992

Today, we will continue our talks on the *Shurangama Sutra*:

The Buddha said, "Ananda, tell me now if the six knots of this cloth can be untied simultaneously."

Ananda replied: "No, World Honored One, they cannot because they were originally tied one after the other and should be untied in the same order. Although they are in the same piece of cloth, they were not tied simultaneously; how can they now be untied all at once?"

The Buddha said: "Your six organs should be disengaged in the same way. When you begin to disentangle them, you will realize that the ego is void. When this voidness is perfectly clear, you will realize that all dharmas are void. When you are disengaged from dharmas the voidness (of ego and dharmas) will vanish. This is called the Patient Endurance of the Uncreate achieved by means of Samadhi in the Bodhisattva Stage."

Here Buddha continues to talk about the six knots, representing the six sense organs of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. He is referring to six knots which he tied in a scarf given to him by the Yama king as a way of

demonstrating a point. Earlier, Buddha said, "…when the six knots are untied, the one also vanishes." "The one" is mind. When the six knots are untied, the mind, and our vexations, will vanish. We must continue talking about the six knots because our vexations are still with us. As long as we have vexations, we will be talking about these knots.

The Buddha says that the six sense organs cannot be disengaged simultaneously. There are two key phrases in the third paragraph: "the ego is void" and "all dharmas are void." The second term can be more literally translated as "the liberation of dharmas," or "liberation from dharmas." When a person realizes the voidness of both ego and dharmas, he is a Bodhisattva who has attained the position of the Patience Endurance of the Uncreate, also called the Endurance of the Non-Arising.

What is meant by "the ego is void"? The Chinese character used here can also be understood to mean that the person or the individual is void. An individual is made up of what we call the five skandhas, or aggregates. So long as an individual does not realize the voidness of the skandhas, he will continue to exist in the cycle of samsara. Samsara perpetuates itself by the twelve links of conditioned arising. On the other hand, if a person realizes the voidness of the five skandhas, they are no longer subject to the cycle of twelve links of conditioned arising. This is called the voidness of the person.

The voidness of the person is also called the voidness of arising. Arising and perishing are relative to each other. A person who has attained the voidness of the person realizes that the five skandhas are empty. Thus he realizes the truth of no-self. He transcends samsara, the cycle of birth and death, and enters nirvana. To transcend samsara is to become an Arhat. This is not considered the ultimate state for a Mahayana practitioner. An Arhat still has an attachment to birth and death in that he has an aversion to birth and death. He wants to leave it behind. So in this sense, the dharma of birth and death, the dharma of nirvana, and the dharma of arising and perishing are not yet empty for him. For him the dharma of arising, which refers to the cycle of birth and death, is empty. But the dharma of perishing, which refers to nirvana, is not yet empty because the Arhat still desires it.

We can see the steps that Buddha talks about as stages of development. First, he talks about the six sense organs, which are physical components of the body. By themselves they do not allow us to be aware of the self. That requires consciousness. But when a person attains the Arhat stage, he realizes that the self that is formed of the five skandhas is empty. That self does not have any real existence. With that understanding he also understands that the six sense organs, which are part of the self, have no real existence. The self that comes from the six sense organs and consciousness is not a real self.

Although an Arhat is no longer subject to the vexations of the cycle of birth and death, he still has what we call "habitual tendencies," or "karmic tendencies." He is also not free of fundamental ignorance, which is called "avidya" in Sanskrit. Because of habitual tendencies and fundamental ignorance, the Arhat has not attained completion.

Buddha said, *"When this voidness is perfectly clear you will realize that all dharmas are void."* The Arhat has only attained the voidness of the individual, so the Arhat has not yet attained the full perfection of emptiness. He would like to stay in nirvana, so for him nirvana is not empty. Likewise, he has an aversion to birth and death, so his experience of the emptiness of birth and death is not thorough. It's as if you said, "The Chan Center is a terrible place. I want to be free of it, so I will go across the street and never come back." You cross the street, and you are free of the trouble and the evil of the Chan Center. However, as long as you dare not cross the street, and you hold on to the idea that the Chan Center is a demonic cave, you are still attached to it. The Chan Center is not empty for you, and you are not thoroughly free of it. The Arhat is like that, and both nirvana and birth and death are not thoroughly empty for him.

This realization that all dharmas are void is state of the Mahayana Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva realizes that not only the self that is formed of the five skandhas is empty, but the five skandhas themselves are also empty. The three realms,

birth and death, in fact, all dharmas, are empty. If the cycle of birth and death is empty, then what can it do to me? So a Bodhisattva does not seek to depart from the cycle of birth and death, but he also is not deluded within the cycle of birth and death. This state is called the emptiness of both person and dharma, and it is the completion, or perfection, of emptiness. When one has realized the emptiness of dharmas, one is liberated from nirvana dharma as well as from samsara dharma.

Imagine once again that you see the Chan Center as a terrible place. Shifu is a bad guy, the monks are evil, and anyone who comes to the Center is in danger. Your first impulse is to leave as fast as possible. But if you know the Chan Center is evil and you run away from it, then it will continue to be evil. If you stay, you may be able to help improve it. If you know that the Center has this potential for evil, when you encounter problems they will not cause you vexations, because you are fully aware of the possible problems and vexations you may encounter here. When problems arise they will not be a surprise to you, or disturb your peacefulness. That is the meaning of the emptiness of dharmas.

Some people have bad habits, and others have strong preconceptions. When people with these characteristics get together, they can cause trouble. For example, if Jim has the habit of using profanity in every sentence, and David believes that using such words indicates anger or malice,

there will be an argument. For Jim, profanity is a normal part of speech. If David can understand that, he will see that in this case profanity does not indicate anger or malice. Then Jim's profanity will not disturb his peace. It will not cause vexations. If David does not understand that Jim considers profanity to be a normal and natural part of language, even before Jim opens his mouth, he will have the preconceived idea that Jim is going to be angry again. This is not correct understanding. When David has the proper understanding then even though the language may sound bad, he will not be affected. If David realizes the emptiness of the person and of the dharmas, he will not let Jim's behavior vex him.

Once I knew someone who was quite nice, but he swore habitually. One day he was pleased with something his son did, and said, "Today, the son-of-a-bitch did pretty well." His son was quite pleased. Other people might find it strange that the father would say such a thing, but it was his way of expressing pleasure with his son. The son was very happy because he understood that that was the way his father praised people. The son didn't even hear "son-of-a-bitch" as something negative. He just understood that his father was happy with him. In a sense, the son realized the emptiness of dharmas.

We should all try to learn to realize the emptiness of dharmas. When we experience individuals and situations, we should remember that both individuals and dharmas are empty.

In the *Shurangama Sutra*, one of the Buddha's Arhat disciples was known for his bad temper. One day as he was crossing the Ganges River the water level rose so high his clothes were soaked. He scolded the river, and asked why the deity of the river wasn't doing anything to prevent the river from rising. The deity was saddened by this, so he went to the Buddha and said, "The water rises, the water drops, and I have nothing to do with it. Yet your disciple blames me."

The Buddha said to his disciple, "You shouldn't have scolded the deity of the river. You should go and apologize to him." So the disciple went to the river and said, "Hey, you lowly being, the other day I scolded you. I apologize." He said the word "apologize," but because of the way he addressed the river deity he was once again being rude. The river deity was doubly unhappy.

The deity did not see the emptiness of the person or the emptiness of dharmas. The disciple was an Arhat, so he saw the emptiness of the person, but he still had karmic tendencies, or karmic habits, which worsened his behavior. He had not realized the emptiness of all phenomena, of dharmas.

When does one realize the emptiness of dharmas? In the Mahayana tradition this happens when a Bodhisattva realizes the Dharma Body and sees the Dharma Nature. We use the terms, "Dharma Body" and "Dharma Nature," but

the Bodhisattva realizes that even the Dharma Body, itself, is empty. When a Bodhisattva realizes the Dharma Body he sees that the Dharma Body is empty. He sees that the Dharma Body is everywhere, universal. In other words, emptiness is universal. If emptiness is universal, it is not necessary for a person to run from this spot to that spot, because emptiness is everywhere. No matter where you are there need not be any vexations.

Now we come to the phrase, *"the voidness will vanish."* This, again, expresses a higher level of understanding. First, the Buddha talks about the emptiness of the person, then about the emptiness of dharmas, and here Buddha refers to the state where both the emptiness of the person and the emptiness of dharmas are, themselves, realized as empty, as neither kind of emptiness arises.

We can understand this theoretically or conceptually, but experientially this is something that ordinary sentient beings cannot know. In fact, we can only know the earlier stages conceptually if we have not experienced them personally. Anybody who has read the *Heart Sutra* knows intellectually that the five skandhas are empty, and the self made of the five skandhas is also empty. All of these ideas can be very clear to us, provided that our own benefit and wellbeing are not at stake. As soon as our own gain or loss is at stake we see that we have not realized the emptiness of the individual.

If that is the case, what good does it do for us to listen to a talk on the sutras? Even though we cannot yet realize emptiness, at least we can emulate the behavior of Bodhisattvas. The sutras give us guidelines concerning what we should and should not do. When we face vexations and confusion, we should first realize that it is normal and natural. Everyone has problems. Then we should remind ourselves that the Buddha said the self is empty. Whatever we encounter, whether it is good fortune or bad, we should accept with equanimity. Say to yourself, "I am a Buddhist and I have learned the Dharma. In this situation I should not experience strong attachment, nor should I be overly excited or overly sad." This is a process of self-education. It allows us to open our minds and get rid of mental obstructions.

In Taiwan, I know a family in which every member has taken refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, thus expressing their faith in Buddhism. The husband has many problems. Even though he has become a Buddhist, he often does and says things that make other people unhappy. He stayed at Nung Chan Monastery in Taiwan for quite a few months, and I tried to help him change. Nothing worked, so I said to his wife, "I think he should go home. He has been in the Temple for quite a while, and the other people there suffer because of him." His wife said, "He has caused the people in the monastery vexations, but only for a few months. I have been married to him for over thirty years, and have had to accept what he says and does for all that

time." It appears that this woman had realized the emptiness of the person and the emptiness of dharmas better than the residents of Nung Chan Monastery.

It is the wife's practice to read the *Sutra of the Earth Store Bodhisattva* every day at home. She feels that she married such a difficult man because of her karma. If she divorced him, who would take care of him? Even the Temple doesn't want him, so his wife stays with him to take care of him. This woman is a Bodhisattva.

If there are people with emotional or personality problems in your family, what can you do? It is best to be compassionate, like the woman I have been talking about. If we cannot be compassionate, we will allow difficult people to cause us pain, and we will not be able to do anything for them. If we can adopt a compassionate attitude we ourselves will suffer less, and we may be able to help the other person. If we can just accomplish this, then listening to a talk on the *Shurangama Sutra* will have been useful. You can see that both emptiness of the self and emptiness of dharmas are important in our daily lives.

When we can be compassionate to people who cause us problems we are being Bodhisattvas. There are many different levels of development for Bodhisattvas. When we first generate the Bodhisattva mind, the bodhicitta, we are at the beginning level. There are also Bodhisattvas who

have attained the position of first bhumi or above, and have eliminated vexations. And there is the ultimate Bodhisattva, the Buddha. We beginning Bodhisattvas must learn from and emulate the Bodhisattvas who have attained the first bhumi or above. Such people are sages and saints.

Buddha says that when the voidness of ego and dharmas vanish, this is called the Patient Endurance of the Uncreate achieved by means of samadhi in the Bodhisattva Stage. The samadhi referred to here is the Shurangama Samadhi, or Great Samadhi. Earlier in this sutra, this samadhi is referred to by other names, such as Wondrous and Subtle Lotus, Diamond King Wonderful Enlightenment, and Samadhi as Illusion. "Samadhi" is used here in a way that is different from "stillness of the mind," the original meaning of samadhi. In that state a practitioner will not break any precepts or have any vexations, but when he emerges from samadhi he will still be subject to vexations. If he has attained Arhatship he will be free of vexations, but he will still have karmic tendencies, which are the most subtle form of vexation, and fundamental ignorance.

The Shurangama Samadhi is different in that stillness of mind and wisdom are simultaneous. A person can function in the world in this kind of samadhi. He can give a talk on the Dharma in samadhi, or walk in samadhi. He can do anything and remain in samadhi. He is in accord with wisdom and free from vexation in all situations. That is Great Samadhi:

stillness and wisdom simultaneously.

The phrase rendered as "Patient Endurance of the Uncreate" is difficult to translate. It can also mean, "The Endurance of Non-Arising," or "The Wisdom of Non-Arising." "Non-arising" or "uncreate" refers to the non-arising of vexation. This state is attained only by Bodhisattvas at the stage of the first bhumi or above. Bodhisattvas before the first bhumi are engaged in "the suppression of vexation." Their vexations are not being eradicated or terminated yet. But once a person reaches the first bhumi he or she begins to terminate vexations. Even those vexations that have not been terminated will not manifest. They will remain suppressed. The Bodhisattva who has attained the first bhumi or above will not let vexations rise up; this is because they have realized the emptiness of both person and dharmas. They have already realized emptiness, so every single thought is associated with emptiness. Every thought comes from emptiness, and returns to emptiness. For such a person, all dharmas neither arise nor perish.

This is the second sense in which we use the term "non-arising." Initially, I explained that it refers to the non-arising of vexations. "Non-arising" also refers to a person in a state where all dharmas neither arise nor perish. So there are three kinds of emptiness: first, the emptiness of person; second, the emptiness of dharmas; and third, the emptiness of person as well as dharmas.

Question: I don't really understand the distinctions between the three kinds of emptiness.

Shifu: A person who has experienced the emptiness of the self, the first emptiness, still wants to leave samsara. When you then experience the emptiness of dharmas, the second emptiness, you are willing to stay within samsara because you are not attached to it, and you do not perceive it as an obstruction. The experience of the emptiness of both the emptiness of self and dharmas, the third emptiness, keeps you from misunderstanding, thinking that you must either leave the world or stay in the world. You realize that it does not matter.

Question: What is the difference between the Mahayana practitioner and the Hinayana practitioner? Is the difference in their concepts, in their mentality or in their method of practice?

Shifu: The difference between the Hinayana and the Mahayana practitioner is not in their methods of practice or concepts. The difference is in their karmic affinity: which vehicle for the Dharma is needed by each person.

Generating Bodhi Mind

January 3, 1993

Thereat the World Honored One said to the great Bodhisattvas and great Arhats in the Assembly, "I want to ask you, Bodhisattvas and Arhats, who are born from Buddhadharma and have reached the state beyond study, this question: when you developed your minds to awaken to the eighteen fields of sense, which one did you regard as the best means of perfection and by what methods did you enter the state of samadhi?"

In this section of the *Shurangama Sutra*, in response to the Buddha's question, twenty-five great Bodhisattvas describe the methods they used to enter into samadhi. The methods of practice which lead to samadhi are called "Dharma doors." The Buddha's question addressed the great Bodhisattvas and Arhats. Arhats are Buddhist saints of the Hinayana tradition. Why does the Buddha question them in a sutra which teaches the Mahayana Path?

The disciples of the Buddha who were present when he delivered the *Shurangama Sutra* appear as Hinayana practitioners, yet they have generated the Mahayana Bodhisattva mind. What do we mean by "appear as Hinayana practitioners?" Traditionally, Mahayana literature uses the term "Hinayana practitioner" dialectically to mean a Buddhist

who pursues his own salvation, rather than the salvation of all sentient beings. Such a person wishes to go beyond the five desires related to the senses, beyond vexations, and beyond the cycle of birth and death of samsara. He dedicates himself to leaving behind the world and worldly activity. In contrast, a Mahayana Bodhisattva practices for the benefit of all beings. He does not leave behind the five desires nor is he attached to them. He lives in the world, but is not attached to it.

What about ordinary sentient beings? We live in the world, we are attached to the world, and we are motivated by the five desires. In this sense, we are neither Hinayana practitioners, nor are we Bodhisattvas. A Hinayana practitioner does not necessarily have to be a bhikshu, a left-home person, a monk. A beginning Hinayana practitioner may be a lay person. However, at the fourth and final fruition the stage of the Arhat, a Hinayana practitioner is always a bhikshu. A Mahayana Bodhisattva may be a left-home person or a lay person at any point on the path, and may seem indistinguishable from an ordinary sentient being.

There is a common misunderstanding that a left-home person is always a Hinayana practitioner, because he has left behind the five desires and renounced the life of an ordinary person. This is a mistake. People sometimes say to me "Shifu, you are a monk so you are only a Hinayana practitioner. We are Bodhisattvas because we live in the midst of the five desires,

but we are not motivated by them." If such self-proclaimed Bodhisattvas practice for their own benefit, or if, when a question of self interest arises, they are motivated by selfish considerations, they are not Bodhisattvas or Hinayana practitioners.

The Buddha uses the term, "great Arhats." If there are great Arhats, does that mean there are small Arhats? By definition, Arhats are "without outflows," meaning their actions do not create new karma. If great Arhats are without outflows, are there small Arhats who are with outflows? "Arhat" means "worthy of making offerings to." An Arhat has attained liberation from samsara and desire, and thus is worthy of receiving offerings. As it is used here, a "great Arhat" has attained liberation and has simultaneously generated the Bodhisattva mind, or Bodhi Mind. He or she vows to help all sentient beings. Bodhi Mind is the altruistic mind of enlightenment. A great Arhat has the mental disposition of a Bodhisattva. Of course, as an Arhat who practices the Hinayana tradition, must be a left-home person.

An Arhat is always without outflows, so his merit and virtue will never again decrease. How can merit and virtue decrease? Imagine a balloon with a puncture or a bucket with a hole. Whatever is inside will eventually leak out. The state of mind produces vexations is like the hole. If there is no hole there will be no outflows or leaks. An Arhat has perfected his practice to the point where his merit and virtue

will never again decrease. Ordinary people sometimes help sentient beings, and sometimes harm them. A crude example would be that you see somebody having difficulty crossing a street and you help him, but later you knock him down on the sidewalk. Do you recognize such behavior? We act in this manner as long as we are subject to the five desires, and harming others will cause our merits and virtue to leak away.

In Taiwan a student sought the help of a teacher in writing his dissertation. The teacher provided guidance and the student was very grateful. However, after the student graduated, the teacher claimed that he had written the dissertation for the student. When the student heard this, he was hurt and angry. First, the teacher helped him then he hurt him. The teacher destroyed a friendship. This is an act which has outflows.

The Buddha also addresses the great Bodhisattvas. People who have only recently generated the Bodhi Mind are usually not on the same level as great Bodhisattvas. Sometimes we call them ordinary sentient being Bodhisattvas, as distinct from saint Bodhisattvas. The attainment of a saint Bodhisattva or great Bodhisattva never regresses, so a great Bodhisattva is also called a "non-regressing Bodhisattva." A Bodhisattva who is close to Buddhahood is also called a great Bodhisattva. In Chinese we do in fact sometimes use the term "small Bodhisattva," but we use it to refer to children who go to temple. Maybe they, too, will grow up to be great Bodhisattvas.

When the Buddha cites those, who were born from Buddhadharma, he refers to the fact that, although our physical life comes from our parents, our wisdom comes from Buddhadharma. Where does Buddhadharma come from? It comes from the Buddha. We say that wisdom is born from Buddha's mouth, emanates from the Dharma, and attains part of the Buddhadharma. "Wisdom is born from Buddha's mouth" because our wisdom originates from the Dharma the Buddha spoke. It "emanates from the Dharma," because, if we follow the Dharma vexations decrease and wisdom arises. When wisdom manifests, we attain a part of the Buddhadharma. If we attain the totality of Buddhadharma, we attain Buddhahood.

We have listened to Buddhadharma; we have already taken the embryo of Buddhadharma into our being. The Dharma has rooted in our minds and it will continue to grow if we continue to practice. Eventually, we are able to use the Dharma to resolve the vexations we encounter in everyday life. When we do that, our wisdom emanates from the Dharma, and we act from the Dharma.

Buddha says that Bodhisattvas and Arhats have reached the state beyond study. Leading to this attainment, there are three kinds of study towards no outflows. The first cultivates ethics, or the precepts; the second cultivates samadhi, or stillness of mind; and the third cultivates wisdom. If we cultivate the precepts, samadhi and wisdom, they will lead

us toward the state of no outflows. Beyond this point there is no need for study.

People often think that practice is meditation, and that meditation leads to enlightenment. But what does enlightenment mean? It means freedom from vexations and the realization of wisdom. Seeking this end, people employ methods such as counting breaths or the contemplation of impurity. This is cultivation of samadhi, but by itself it is not enough. Conduct in daily life is extremely important. Actions, verbal expression, and the thoughts and feelings in the mind, constitute what Buddhists call the three kinds of actions or the three kinds of karma. If actions of body, speech and mind accord with Buddhist guidelines, then the precepts are followed. Contrary actions break the precepts. Act in this way and the cultivation of samadhi will not be successful and wisdom will not manifest. Only proper actions will accord with the precepts, cultivate samadhi, and manifest wisdom. When wisdom manifests and vexations disappear, you will no longer want to commit acts that cause vexation to yourself or others. There is no more need for study.

If you truly understand this, then you have reached the state beyond the need for study. Most probably you understand the words, but not the true meaning of "beyond study." To guide us in this pursuit, Shakyamuni Buddha asked the great Bodhisattvas and Arhats to describe the methods they used to reach the point of no outflow and the state beyond study.

Buddha asked the Bodhisattvas and Arhats, "*when you developed your minds to awaken to the eighteen fields of sense, which one did you regard as the best means of perfection and by what methods did you enter the state of samadhi?"*

The eighteen fields of sense are what we have already referred to as the eighteen realms. They encompass the six sense organs, plus the six sense objects, plus the six consciousnesses. These eighteen fields of sense constitute the physical and mental self. Awakening to the eighteen fields of sense means that the great Bodhisattvas and Arhats were enlightened to the emptiness of the fields of sense, and to the emptiness of the physical and mental aggregates we call the self.

The *Shurangama Sutra* does not use the term samadhi in the ordinary sense of complete meditative absorption. Here it refers to the Shurangama Samadhi, the ultimate state of enlightenment. Buddha asked the twenty-five great practitioners who were present, "What was the nature of your practice such that you attained non-obstruction with respect to the eighteen fields and thereby reached Great Enlightenment?"

"When you developed your minds..." refers to when they initially generated Bodhi Mind – the aspiration to attain Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. If you think

only of your own salvation, that is not generating the mind. Second, generating the Bodhi Mind refers to the methods of practice used to cultivate Bodhi Mind. It is not advisable to change your method of practice often. Otherwise you allow the initial generation of mind to slip away too often.

In the Chan tradition the first method a practitioner uses is called "the original practice," or "the original practice huatou," and it is best to persist with this method. We should strive to enter deeply into practice through this method. We should strive to enter deeply into practice through this Dharma door. When we help other sentient beings, it is appropriate to use innumerable methods, but in our won practice, we should adhere to one. Entering deeply into the practice through the original method, we may help others with a variety of methods. This is called "completion without obstruction."

The generation of Bodhi Mind may at first be pleasant, but it is difficult to sustain. That is why Amitabha Buddha made forty-eight great vows when he first generated Bodhi Mind. And when Samantabhadra Bodhisattva generated Bodhi Mind he made ten great vows. Although it is common for practitioners to have virtuous thoughts and aspirations when they generate Bodhi Mind, as they encounter difficulties on the Path these often slip away. Some people say, "Shifu, becoming a Bodhisattva is difficult. Let me practice for my own good first. Let's discuss becoming a Bodhisattva later."

Other people find practice altogether too difficult, and say, "Shifu, I think there is no hope for me in this lifetime. Next lifetime I'll practice."

These practitioners are regressing from their initial generation of Bodhi Mind. Such thoughts require you to rededicate yourself to your goal.

During retreats people are often moved and quite grateful for what they have experienced. They express these feelings in the discussion at the end of the retreat. Someone once said, "I vow to be your disciple, lifetime after lifetime, until I attain Buddhahood." That is a great vow. I said to him, "If you are still around when I come back for my next life, you will be old and I'll be a young monk. Will you still take me as your Shifu?" He answered, "It doesn't matter whether a teacher is old or young. I will still follow you." However, shortly after the retreat he heard of a master reputed to enlighten his disciples in a matter of days, and went off to follow that master.

What happened to his vow to follow me until he attained Buddhahood? When he made that vow, it did not indicate genuine generation of Bodhi Mind. He made the vow only because of his emotional state at the end of the retreat. When you generate Bodhi Mind, be cautious, and do not expect too much of yourself right away, or you will become discouraged. Do not say that you will follow me, say that

you will follow the Buddha, or vow that you will persevere in your method of practice until you attain Buddhahood. These are great vows indeed.

I stated that it is not good to change your method often. It is also inadvisable to have several masters at once. Many intelligent people come to me when they already have other masters, and I ask them, "Why are you here?" They often feel that it can't hurt to have one more master, no matter how many they have already. They think they can get a little from each, and end up with a lot. It's as if each master gave them a dollar, so that if they have ten masters, they end up with ten dollars.

Studying with a master is more like going to a physician. If you go to many physicians for the same condition and each gives you a different prescription, the combination of drugs may be ineffective or even harmful, although one prescription alone may provide the cure.

Today I have discussed three important ideas. The first is the state of being without outflows, when merit and virtue no longer outflow, or "leak." To reach the state without outflows we must practice the three studies: precepts, samadhi, and wisdom. If we act properly, we accumulate merit and virtue, but we can easily undermine our efforts by doing what we should not do.

The second idea is "born from the Dharma." Our wisdom derives from, is born of, the Dharma spoken by the Buddha. We use the Dharma to free ourselves of vexations and in this way our wisdom will manifest.

The generation of mind is the third important thing I covered. This always refers to the generation of Bodhi Mind, the mind of the Mahayana Bodhisattva. To generate and cultivate Bodhi Mind, we should adhere to one method of practice. When our effort slackens, and we regress on the Path, we must invoke the initial generation of Bodhi Mind, persevere, and ultimately succeed.

Penetration through Sound

May 16, 1993

Kaundinya, one of the first five bhikshus, rose from his seat, prostrated himself with his head at the feet of the Buddha and declared: "When, soon after His enlightenment, we met the Tathagata in the Mrgadava and Kukkuta Parks, I heard His voice and awakened to His teaching of the Four Noble Truths. When questioned by the Buddha, I interpreted them correctly and the Tathagata sealed my awakening by naming me Ajnata (The Wondrous Sound Is Secret and Complete). I attained Arhatship by means of sound. As the Buddha now asks about the best means of perfection, to me sound is the best according to my personal experience.

This is the beginning of one of the best known sections of the *Shurangama Sutra*, "Twenty-five Methods of Complete Penetration." In the paragraph above, Buddha asked, "When you developed your minds to awaken to the eighteen fields of sense, which one did you regard as the best means of perfection and by what methods did you enter the state of samadhi?" Here "samadhi" and "wisdom" are the same. Furthermore, these are Mahayana samadhi and wisdom. Buddha asked his disciples, "How did you enter samadhi?" In answer, twenty-five great practitioners each described how they cultivated enlightenment. They describe so many different methods of cultivation that we should all be able to

find a method to help us attain enlightenment.

The first of the Buddha's followers to answer was Kaundinya. He was one of the Buddha's five cousins who became his first bhikshus after his enlightenment. Kaundinya was often their spokesman and he was the first disciple of the Buddha to attain Arhatship.

After the Buddha's enlightenment, he went to Mrgadava and Kukkuta Parks (Deer Park), in a section of India now known as Sarnath, where he found Kaundinya and his other cousins. There he began teaching by explaining the Four Noble Truths to his cousins. However, Kaundinya did not attain enlightenment because he listened to the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. It was because he heard Buddha's voice. The voice of the Buddha, not the understanding of his words, caused Kaundinya to realize the Four Noble Truths. There is a difference. Later Buddha asked him to demonstrate his understanding, affirmed it, and gave him the name Ajnata. The Buddha said that Kaundinya had fully and completely received the meaning and the significance of sound. Kaundinya had attained Complete Penetration through sound. What does "Complete Penetration" mean? It means that when you have entered through one Dharma door, you can enter through any Dharma door. In other words, when you thoroughly realize one aspect of the Dharma, then you understand all Dharma completely.

Now that I have explained the general meaning of this paragraph, I will explore it in more detail, beginning with the story of the five bhikshus. Shakyamuni, who became the Buddha, was a prince from a small kingdom in India. After he left home to become an ascetic in search of enlightenment, his father, the king, was alarmed and upset. He sent five of his cousins to talk him into returning home. However, when they reached Shakyamuni and saw him and understood what he was seeking, they were so moved that, instead of bringing him home, they decided to follow his example.

After six years of ascetic practice, Shakyamuni realized that his austere practices were no help in answering the questions of suffering and death which set him upon his original journey. He accepted an offering of porridge cooked with goat's milk, something that would normally be eschewed by ascetics. When he acted in this manner, his five cousins thought he had abandoned his ideals and they left him. Two went to Deer Park and the others went elsewhere. Shakyamuni attained Buddhahood near Bodh Gaya, in modern Bihar, India. Bodh Gaya and the Deer Park are quite far from one another. When we were in India a few years ago, it took us a day and a half to go from Bodh Gaya to Deer Park by bus. Buddha walked from Bodh Gaya to the Deer Park in order to teach his five cousins who had became his first five bhikshus.

The name Kaundinya means "fire worshipper" or "fire vehicle." Either Kaundinya had belonged to a fire-

worshipping religion at one time, or his name was traditional in his family. Only Kaundinya attained Arhatship the first time the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths. In fact, when he heard the sound of the Buddha's voice, he attained Arhatship. When the Buddha questioned him, he was able to explain the meaning of the Four Noble Truths on three levels, which correspond to the Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel of the Four Noble Truths. Kaundinya was extraordinary. The Buddha's other cousins attained Arhatship later, and even that was extraordinary. To truly attain Arhatship, one must realize the Four Noble Truths on the three levels, as Kaundinya did. I have been listening to the teachings of the Four Noble Truths from the time I was a child, and have tried to convey those teachings to others, yet I have still not attained Arhatship.

The Four Noble Truths describe suffering, the causes of suffering, the possibility of the extinction of suffering, and the path leading to the extinction of suffering. Although Buddha explained them in this order, the sequence in which we come to know them is the fact of suffering, the cause of suffering, the path, and the extinction of suffering. The Buddha explained the Four Noble Truths three times, at three levels, for his disciples. These explanations are called the Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel of the Four Noble Truths. In the first turning, the Buddha explained each of the Four Noble Truths: first, suffering is the reality of life; second, the cause of suffering is karma, which results from

our self-centered actions in this and previous lives; third, it is possible to end suffering; and fourth, if we wish to end suffering we must cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold Path is right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. All of the Buddha's teachings are included in the Four Noble Truths, so of course we should all realize enlightenment after hearing them.

The second turning of the Dharma Wheel of the Four Noble Truths was a repetition and affirmation of what the Buddha had already said. In the second turning Buddha said that, first, we should know that life is suffering; second, we should know the cause of suffering; third, we should know that suffering should be terminated; and fourth, we should know what the Path which terminates suffering is, and we should cultivate that Path. Thus Buddha repeated what he had said in the first turning for those of us who are not so quick to learn, saying in effect, "Make sure you know this, make sure you know that."

In the third turning of the Dharma Wheel of the Four Noble Truths the Buddha made a final affirmation. He said, "I know what suffering is. I have terminated the cause of suffering. I have cultivated the Path terminating the cause of suffering. I have attained Nirvana." Buddha described his own realization, but what he said is true of anyone who attains Arhatship. An Arhat has ended all vexations and is free from

birth and death. By virtue of hearing the Buddha's voice at the first turning, Kaundinya was ready to go to the third turning. For this reason, Arhats are often called shravakas, "sound-hearers," because they attained realization from hearing the Buddha's words.

We use "suffering" to translate the Sanskrit term "duhkha." "Suffering" is not as all encompassing as duhkha, but it is the English word which is closest. But what is duhkha, or suffering?

Student: Pain caused by not having our desires met.

Master Sheng Yen: That is true, but it is not far-reaching enough. The very existence of life causes suffering. Whenever there is life there is seeking, or desire, so if you say that suffering is caused by desire that is not incorrect. But most directly put, the existence of life is suffering. For anyone who is not liberated in the Buddhist sense, birth and death are suffering. But for anyone who is liberated, birth and death are not suffering. Those who have attained the liberation of Hinayana Arhatship will no longer experience suffering. But since they understand that life, itself, is suffering they do not want to accept the cycle of birth and death again. The Hinayana practitioner, and the Hinayana Arhat, would like both body and mind to escape the cycle of birth and death.

Mahayana practitioners and Bodhisattvas have a different perspective. They believe that as long as your mind is free of attachments and desires, your mind is liberated. If your mind is liberated, it does not matter whether your body is in the midst of birth and death. Liberation is a matter of the mind for the Mahayana practitioner. Liberation does not mean that the body will no longer be susceptible to karma, but if your mind has no attachments, you will not be limited by birth and death. You do not have to go beyond birth and death in order to attain liberation.

Many people recognize the greatness of the idea of the compassionate Mahayana Bodhisattva, who does not leave behind birth and death but stays in samsara to help sentient beings. Conceptually, it is easy to adhere to the Mahayana teaching that if you have no attachments, it is not necessary to leave this world behind. However when people encounter real vexations and suffering, they usually try to run away from them. When the Chinese Communists took over the whole of China in 1949, many Buddhists, including monks and nuns, tried to flee. They went from northern China to the south, and then to Hong Kong. Some decided that Hong Kong wasn't safe enough, and they went to the United States or other foreign countries. Master Hsu-yun (Empty Cloud) was among the people who left China. But when in Hong Kong, he decided that he had to go back to China. When people asked him why, he said: "The situation in Communist China is so bad, Buddhism may soon disappear. If I do not

go back, it will only get worse, so I have to go back." Of the Buddhists who ran away from Communist rule, who among them were true Mahayana practitioners?

During the Sung Dynasty, China was overrun by fierce Mongolians, who killed and burned as they went. About 500 monks from a large monastery decided to leave to escape from them, but one Master decided to stay. When the others asked him why he would not run away, he said, "If the Mongolians do not have anyone to kill, they will be angry." When the Mongolians arrived, they found the monastery completely empty except for the Master. The Mongolian general said, "Why are you still here? There must be something wrong with you." The Master said, "It is the monks who left who have something wrong with them. They were afraid, and I am not afraid." The general asked, "Why didn't you leave?" and the Master replied, "If we all ran away and you did not have anyone to kill, you might burn down the monastery. Now maybe you will leave the monastery alone."

If your house were on fire, would you try to escape or stay inside? Of course, you would try to escape. To die in the fire would not be particularly intelligent. If the door were blocked, you would try the window. However, if you thought you could put the fire out, you would stay and try to save your home. Also, people can be killed if they stampede during a fire and think only of themselves. Someone who is liberated would think about how best to help others no matter what the

danger to himself, because he has no concept of a separate self He might send someone to call the fire department, and calmly help everybody else to escape.

This morning I read an article concerning why Buddhism disappeared from India, some 700 or 800 years ago. At that time only Hinayana Buddhism existed, exhibiting an attitude towards life decidedly more negative than that of Mahayana. Hinayana Buddhists wanted to escape human existence, so they did not contribute to Indian society as a whole. When practitioners want only to free themselves from this world of suffering, and are not interested in helping other sentient beings, anyone who joins the Buddhist community does not contribute to society. When the Muslims overran India, the Hindus resisted and maintained their religion and some of their social structure. The Buddhists, on the other hand, ran away. The Muslim invaders followed them and eventually all the Indian Buddhists were killed or died out.

In China, the Mahayana tradition helped Buddhism survive periods of persecution. Sometimes Buddhism was wiped out in the cities, but it survived in the mountains. When it was destroyed in the mountains, it still survived among the common people. Whenever the persecution abated, Buddhism always reappeared and grew strong again. According to the article I read, because Mahayana Buddhists have always been willing to be involved in the world for the benefit of others, Buddhism has not disappeared from China.

Now let us return to the text. We were talking about Kaundinya's realization. Buddha gave him the name Ajnata, which means "Wondrous Sound that is Esoteric and Complete." The esoteric part is secret only to those who have not attained realization. "Complete" refers first, to Kaundinya as Arhat, who no longer has anything to accomplish, and for whom birth and death hold no suffering. Second, it refers to the unenlightened who witness the enlightened manifestation of wisdom and compassion in Kaundinya, and thus see him as complete. The *Shurangama Sutra* is a Mahayana sutra, and in Mahayana Buddhism, wisdom is always associated with compassion; so after attaining Mahayana Arhatship, Kaundinya manifested complete wisdom and compassion for all sentient beings.

In the Chan tradition there are many examples of practitioners who became enlightened through sound, even in modern times. One evening when Master Hsu-yun was practicing in the meditation hall, the person serving tea burned him as he poured hot water into his cup. Master Hsu-yun dropped the cup, and when he heard the sound it made as it broke, he had an enlightenment experience.

To become enlightened through sound may seem easy, but Kaundinya practiced diligently as a follower of Shakyamuni for six years before he realized enlightenment. Master Hsu-yun left home to devote himself to practice when he was nineteen and did not have the experience I described until

he was fifty-six, thirty-seven years later. If we practice as hard as Kaundinya did and have the good fortune to meet a Buddha, no doubt we, too, can realize enlightenment through sound. Otherwise we may have to be at least as patient as Master Hsu-yun. I am in my sixties now, and if I practice patiently for the next 37 years, I will be 100 years old. Most of you are younger than I am. Do not waste your chance. It is important to practice diligently. Put down your attachments and use your method. When we do that, enlightenment can be simple.

Awakening Through the Sense Organ of Consciousness

December 12, 1993

In this section of the *Shurangama Sutra*, six of Buddha's Arhat disciples describe their attainment of perfection through the sense organs. We have already looked at the sections about eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. Now we come to the section on the final sense organ, mind, or consciousness:

Subhuti then rose from his seat, prostrated himself with his head at the feet of the Buddha and declared: 'As my consciousness (the sense organ of consciousness) was already free from all hindrances in former eons, I can now remember my previous reincarnations as countless as sands in the Ganges. Even when I was a fetus in my mother's womb, I had already awakened to the condition of still voidness which subsequently expanded to fill all the ten directions and which enabled me to teach living beings how to waken to their absolute nature. Thanks to the Tathagata, I realized the absolute voidness of self-natured awareness, and with the perfection of my immaterial nature, I attained Arhatship, thereby entering suddenly into the Tathagata's Precious Brightness which was as immense as space and the ocean, wherein I (partially) achieved Buddha wisdom. The Buddha sealed my attainment of the stage beyond learning; I am, therefore, regarded as the foremost disciple because of

my understanding of immaterial self-nature. As the Buddha now asks about the best means of perfection, according to my personal experience, the best consists of perceiving the unreality of all phenomena, with the elimination of even this unreality, in order to reduce all things to emptiness.

Each of the great Arhat disciples of the Buddha had his own special understanding, and it was Subhuti who had the deepest understanding of emptiness.

Subhuti said, *"As my consciousness was already free from all hindrances in former eons…"* If your sense organ of consciousness is able to penetrate into emptiness, then when you perceive the external environment, you will see that it is also empty. This was Subhuti's state, and so he was free of hindrances, or vexations. Conversely, if you see that the external environment is empty, but do not see into the nature of your own consciousness, you will still have vexations.
Of all the sense organs, only the organ of consciousness does not have direct contact with the external environment. All the other organs – eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body; respond to the environment. However consciousness, which responds to thoughts, is only in contact with internal phenomena, such as memory, ideas, and fantasies.

What kind of emptiness is it that Subhuti awakened to? It is not nothingness, or the emptiness that denies the existence of things. Buddhism does not describe a nihilistic state,

where nothing is experienced as existing. The emptiness Buddhism speaks of is the simultaneity of emptiness and existence. If you have an image of a handsome man in your mind, and you think, "That man is really handsome," is your mind empty? If a handsome man is standing in front of you and you perceive him, but your mind stops at that, without thinking, "That man is really handsome," or anything else, is your mind empty? If your mind is not moved by the image of the person, is your mind empty? If you generate liking or disliking, your mind has moved.

If your mind (the sense organ of consciousness) cannot be moved by the image (the thought it perceives) moment by moment, then every moment is a new beginning and the mind is not moving. If the mind generates the thought, "I like him," that is also new; but now there is the liking, and that itself shows that your mind has moved.

When your mind perceives something, but is not moved by it, that is emptiness. For instance, your mind perceives very clearly the image of a person standing in front of you, but because the mind is not attached to it, it is perceived as empty. This is the nature of Subhuti's emptiness, which is simultaneously empty and existent. However, to try to do this on purpose, that is not giving rise to like or dislike when perceiving someone, is contrived effort, not true emptiness.

What if you solve the problem of your mind perceiving a

handsome man and thinking "He looks good," by closing your eyes? Is the problem gone? What do you perceive? Is it existence or emptiness? Because you still hold the image of the man in your mind and can't escape from it, you do not perceive emptiness; you are perceiving existence. True emptiness does not deny existence.

Subhuti was born into a particular family in order to deliver that family. The moment before Subhuti was born all the household goods disappeared. Everything was empty. Do you think that they still existed? The family was shocked and worried, but as soon as Subhuti came out of his mother's womb everything reappeared. This incident was a symbolic representation of simultaneous emptiness and existence.

Subhuti's father was very concerned about this incident, and asked a deity for an explanation. At that time deities were quite accessible, if you called them they came, just like that! Subhuti's father asked the deity, "Why did everything in my house disappear the moment before Subhuti was born, and reappear as soon as he was born?" The deity replied, "Emptiness is not other than existence, and existence is not other than emptiness." The deity also said that Subhuti had attained understanding of emptiness eons ago.

As he was born, Subhuti manifested a little bit of the power of emptiness, which he had cultivated for eons. Only the household goods disappeared. Actually the

power of emptiness extends to the ten directions, meaning everywhere. We could say that when Subhuti was born, everything was empty in the ten directions. Why did Subhuti manifest emptiness? He did it to benefit sentient beings. He allowed his family to experience a taste of the emptiness of Buddhism.

Next Subhuti said, *"Thanks to the Tathagata I realized the absolute voidness of self-natured awareness, and with the perfection of my immaterial nature, I attained Arhatship, thereby entering suddenly into the Tathagata's Precious Brightness which was as immense as space and the ocean, wherein I (partially) achieved Buddha knowledge. The Buddha sealed my attainment of the stage beyond study; I am therefore regarded as the foremost disciple because of my understanding of immaterial self-nature."*

The Chinese which is translated as "I realized the absolute voidness of self-nature awareness" is just four characters: nature, awareness (or awakening), truth, and emptiness. Here "nature" refers to the nature of emptiness, so the whole phrase means "awakening to the nature of true emptiness." Subhuti was describing his experience. He awakened to, or recognized, the nature of true emptiness.

Robert, you are wearing a sweater. What's inside the pocket?
Robert: Nothing.

Master Sheng Yen: Empty?

Robert: Empty.

Master Sheng Yen: When we talk about true emptiness, is it the same as the emptiness of Robert's pocket? There is nothing inside?

Student: No.

Master Sheng Yen: They are not the same, but why not? To perceive true emptiness means in the face of all the various phenomena you experience, you recognize that the intrinsic nature of phenomena is empty. Phenomena have existence but you see that the intrinsic nature of phenomena is empty. This includes mental phenomena such as thoughts and feelings, as well as physical phenomena such as cars, people, time and light. You do not deny the existence of phenomena. This is what is meant by true emptiness. Do you understand?

If you understand, then you have an intellectual understanding of "nature awakening true emptiness." But an intellectual understanding is not the same as an experiential grasp of "nature awakening true emptiness." You do not yet have personal experienced of that state. Now I may have created a misunderstanding. When I say, "nature awakening true emptiness," do you think that there is such a thing as the nature of emptiness? Why is it that we do not see this nature

of emptiness? Is it because we are ordinary sentient beings? Once we realize a certain level, so that our Dharma eyes are opened, will we all be able to see the nature of emptiness?

This is a misunderstanding. It is like a blind person who has never seen empty space, and thinks, "Someday I will find a good doctor who can cure my eyes, and I will be able to see this thing they call empty space." We who are not blind know that you cannot see empty space, but the blind person does not understand. Likewise, so long as a person is attached to something called "the nature of emptiness" his awakening is not complete. It is only when he is free from any attachment, even to the nature of emptiness, that his awakening will be complete.

The next phrase is translated, "the perfection of my immaterial nature." The Chinese literally means "the nature of emptiness, complete and illuminating." It describes thorough awakening. That is possible only when the person is free from any attachment, even to the nature of emptiness.

When Subhuti attained Arhatship he entered into what is translated as, "*the Tathagata's Precious Brightness which was as immense as space and the ocean."* The Chinese literally reads: "precious-brightness-emptiness-ocean." Let us retranslate this. Precious Brightness refers to the Buddha's wisdom. Here Precious Brightness refers to the functioning

or activity that arises from such wisdom.

Earlier in this section of the *Shurangama Sutra*, "emptiness" was qualified by the term "nature," and it referred to the essence of emptiness. Subhuti talks about the nature of emptiness. Here he is talking about a different aspect of emptiness. He expresses the wondrous function of emptiness. Emptiness is what wisdom arises from. "Ocean" means something unlimited and completely unbounded, not merely an Atlantic Ocean or Pacific Ocean. Subhuti meant that Buddha's wisdom is completely unlimited. This wisdom arises from emptiness, so all together the phrase means "the Precious Brightness arising from emptiness, which is without limit." It refers to the unlimited functioning of Buddha's wisdom.

Subhuti next says, *"...wherein I (partially) achieved Buddha knowledge."* In the *Lotus Sutra* there are similar phrases, which are translated as, "to open up to," or "to enter," or "to realize the Buddha's wisdom." An Arhat at this level has attained the same kind of wisdom as the wisdom of the Buddha. It is the same kind of wisdom because it results from the Arhat's realization of emptiness.

Does that mean that the Arhat has the same wisdom as the Buddha? The wisdom of the Buddha is wisdom of liberation and compassion. The wisdom of liberation is for the Buddha's own sake, whereas the wisdom of compassion

is for the purpose of helping other sentient beings. Even though the Arhat's wisdom is unlimited, it only shares part of the wisdom of liberation and compassion. Nonetheless, even though the Arhat's wisdom is not as broad or deep as that of the Buddha, it has the same characteristics.

Subhuti goes on, *"The Buddha sealed my attainment of the stage beyond learning..."* This refers to the three higher learnings; morality, concentration, and wisdom. In the Theravada tradition, the stage beyond study is Arhatship. There are four levels of sainthood. In the first three practitioners still need to study, but by the stage of Arhat the practitioner has done everything that needs to be done. Three phrases are usually used to describe that state: all that needs to be done has been accomplished, the process of birth and death has been transcended, and it is not necessary to be reborn.

What Subhuti says next is translated as, *"I am regarded as the foremost disciple because of my understanding of immaterial self-nature."* The Chinese has a meaning which is not clearly conveyed in the English. We have been talking about Subhuti attaining Arhatship, or liberation, and some of you may think that liberation must be a position you can reach. But here Subhuti points out that the nature of liberation itself is empty. On one hand, liberation comes from awakening to emptiness. On the other hand, the nature of liberation is emptiness. Because of this understanding,

the Buddha recognized Subhuti as foremost in the profound understanding of emptiness.

Do you understand? What use is it to listen to such ideas? Subhuti talked about his experience of nature, emptiness, and so on, but what has that got to do with us? To what extent is it useful to us? There must be some intelligent people here who can answer that. If you are not so intelligent you can give a foolish answer. That is also all right. Is there a fool who wants to volunteer?

Student: In the last retreat my method was the huatou, "What is wu?" Toward the end of the retreat I told Shifu that I had fallen in love with Miss Wu. Shifu asked me what it meant to fall in love with Miss Emptiness. So a talk about emptiness is useful for my practice.

Master Sheng Yen: This section of the *Shurangama Sutra* emphasizes emptiness, and the different aspects of emptiness. When we practice Chan, we want to realize enlightenment, but what does enlightenment mean? Enlightenment means awakening to the true nature of emptiness. Is emptiness empty or existent? You should know now that it is simultaneously empty and existent. The nature of Nirvana and the nature of liberation are also the same as the nature of emptiness.

The last sentence in the paragraph we read from the sutra is difficult. The translation reads, *"As the Buddha now asks*

about the best means of perfection, according to my personal experience, the best consists of perceiving the unreality of all phenomena, with the elimination of even this unreality, in order to reduce all things to emptiness."

There are three ideas here. In Chinese, *"the best consists of perceiving the unreality of all phenomena…"* says approximately: "recognizing that all the phenomena are non-phenomena." This describes a process of negating. It is similar to the idea contained in the *Diamond Sutra*, which says that all phenomena are beyond phenomena, or all phenomena are non-phenomena. In the second phrase, *"…with the elimination of even this unreality,"* the negation process is continued until everything is negated, even emptiness. The third phrase says, *"…in order to reduce all thing to emptiness."* Here, emptiness reaches completion. This is emptiness in the sense of wu as in the huatou, "What is wu?"

Enlightenment through Eye Consciousness

December 19, 1993

We have been studying the section of the *Shurangama Sutra* called "The Twenty-five Kinds of Perfect Penetration." Perfect Penetration is the state of thorough, ultimate enlightenment, and twenty-five methods of attaining such enlightenment are described. There are actually infinite numbers of methods of practice through which we can attain enlightenment. These twenty-five are simply used as examples.

We have already studied the section of the sutra concerning the methods of practice which employ the six sense organs. Today we will look at one of the methods which employ the six consciousnesses of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. In the sutra, Shariputra, the wisest of the Buddha's disciples, describes perfect penetration through eye consciousness. The beginning of this paragraph, which I have discussed, reads:

Shariputra then rose from his seat, prostrated himself with his head at the feet of the Buddha and declared: "In former eons, the sight-perception of my mind was already pure and clean, and in my subsequent incarnations as countless as the sands in the Ganges, I could see without hindrance through all things either on a worldly or supra-mundane plane. [One day], I met on the road the two brothers Kasyapa who were

both preaching the doctrine of causality, and after listening to them my mind awakened to the Truth and thereby became extensive and boundless."

Shariputra had relied on his eye consciousness for countless eons, countless lifetimes. It was pure and sharp and he benefited from it, but still, he was not able to attain Arhatship until the time of the Buddha. Different people use different methods of practice, some relying on hearing, others on sight, and others, like Shariputra, on eye consciousness. Shariputra reasoned with the eye of his mind.

What does it mean to use the eye of the mind, or eye consciousness, to reason? If I say to you that something is like a flower in the sky, or like a reflection in a mirror, you use your ears to hear my words but then you use the mind's eye, or eye consciousness, to visualize what you have heard.

Some people listen to the Dharma with their ear consciousness; some listen with their eye consciousness. It is even possible to use one's nose consciousness, as we will discuss later. How can you use eye consciousness to listen? If I say "heaven" some of you will see an image of what you think heaven is like, and when I say "hell" you may visualize a terrifying hell. When we associate a visual image with something we hear or think of, and that visual image does not come to us through our eyes acting as sense organs, that is "using eye consciousness." What we visualize

may be something we have seen before or something purely imaginary. For instance, Bob has entertained us with magic tricks at our Buddha's birthday celebration here at the Center. When you hear the word "magic," you may visualize Bob doing magic, or you may visualize some magical occurrence.

Now let us return to the text:

My mind awakened to the Truth and thereby became extensive and boundless. I then left home to follow the Buddha and achieved perfect sight perception, thereby acquiring fearlessness, attaining Arhatship and qualifying as the Buddha's Elder Son – born from the Buddha's mouth and by transmission of the Dharma. As the Buddha now asks about the best means of perfection, according to my personal experience, the best consists in realizing the most illuminating knowledge by means of the mind's radiant sight perception.

Shariputra said, *"My mind awakened to the Truth and thereby became extensive and boundless,"* meaning that he realized enlightenment, and his illumination was perfect. Usually we refer to the Buddha as having three kinds of illumination; the illumination of past lives, heavenly eye illumination, and the illumination of the cessation of all outflows. But in this sentence the word "illumination" simply means the transformation of consciousness to wisdom. In Shariputra's case the transformation of eye consciousness to wisdom

was perfect.

Those of you who do not come here often may not be clear about what enlightenment, or illumination, means. Why is enlightenment important? When we have not realized enlightenment, we perceive things as if we were surrounded by darkness and clouds. Everything is unclear. This is vexation, and sometimes it is so profound that it is as if you cannot see your hand in front of your face. In China we say that when your mind is like that, you don't know your own father and mother, nor can you recognize your children. On the other hand, when the mind is enlightened, perception is as unimpeded as vision on a clear, sunny day. Confusion and vexation are absent and there is no disturbance from the environment. Perception is completely unobstructed.

Returning to the sutra, Shariputra said, *"I... achieved perfect sight perception thereby acquiring fearlessness..."* Why is it that a person who has attained deep enlightenment and has no vexations is fearless? When we have no vexations we are free of worries. We do not grasp or reject, so there is nothing to fear.

It is not that someone who is enlightened has no fear because of arrogance. Rather, he or she sees things as they are and accepts them. Being fearful rarely helps us. If this building collapsed, or if someone on the street pointed a gun at you, would you be afraid? Just a week ago someone shot several

commuters at random on a Long Island train. If you had been on that train, would you have been afraid? (Audience: "Yes.") Obviously, one would be afraid in such a situation. But what good does it do? If you are shot, you will be injured or die, whether you are afraid or not. Eventually three people who were not too afraid to act, captured the gunman.

A deeply enlightened person attains Great Fearlessness, and this is different from ordinary or mindless fearlessness. What is mindless fearlessness? A person who is not afraid because he relies on outside protection exhibits this characteristic. Perhaps he is rich and thinks he can buy safety. Maybe he has a gun or is stronger than other people and thinks that will protect him. It is easy to see that these things are not truly reliable, so this can only be called mindless fearlessness.

I went to Argentina recently, and there is a great deal of violence there. Someone I know who owns a watch store acquired two guns to protect his store. He said they are new models with excellent features! Unfortunately, one day five or six people went into his store and demanded that he hand over his guns. He thought that the intruders might have been sent by the government, and he asked them how they knew he had guns. They said, "We know." He had no choice but to give them the guns. Before he had the opportunity to use the guns, they were taken away from him. Besides that, he was beaten with the butt of his gun, seriously injured, and robbed. Clearly, his guns did not protect him, even though

they had excellent features.

In Paraguay I saw a store filled with guns and other weapons. I didn't realize that they were real; I thought they were toys. I knew someone in the store so I went in and looked around, and came back out and said, "This store has toys which look exactly like real guns!" Then I was told that they were real guns. You may think a store full of weapons might be a safe place to be, but it could be very dangerous.

Great Fearlessness does not rely on strength, on wealth, on knowledge, or on anything else. With this attitude you can neither lose, nor be defeated. If you do not strive to win, if you neither grasp nor reject, you cannot lose. Relying on nothing, you cannot be defeated. Great Fearlessness may not rely on anything, but you can make use of anything, as wisdom dictates.

In the time of the Buddha there was a Brahmin scholar who was famous for his great learning. His knowledge was so vast that he feared he might explode. He put iron bands around his head and abdomen to protect them from the pressure of so much learning. The Brfahmin heard that Shakyamuni Buddha was also known to be very learned and wise, so he went to Shakyamuni and said, "Let us have a competition." The Buddha said, "Fine." The Brahmin said, "Let whoever loses this competition become the other person's disciple." Shakyamuni said, "Fine," and the scholar said, "Why don't

you suggest a proposition for us to debate?" Shakyamuni said, "I have nothing to say." The scholar said, "In that case let me say something." Shakyamuni said, "Fine." The scholar started expounding his ideas, but when he talked about existence Shakyamuni talked about nonexistence, and when he talked about non-existence, Shakyamuni talked about existence. Finally the scholar said, "Why do you always take the opposite side?" And the Buddha said, "I have no view to convince you of. You have great learning, but I have no learning." The scholar became Buddha's disciple. To have no learning, not to rely on anything, is really the greatest learning.

Returning to the sutra, we read that Shariputra next said, *"... attaining Arhatship and qualifying as the Buddha's Elder Son."* What does "the Buddha's Elder Son" mean? We know that Shakyamuni Buddha became a Buddha through his wisdom. The phrase "attaining bodhi," or "attaining the path," or in this case, "attaining Arhatship," means attaining wisdom. To be recognized as the Buddha's Elder Son, Shariputra must have been foremost in wisdom (as the elder son is foremost in birth). The sutras say that the Buddha had one thousand, two hundred and fifty great Arhat disciples, but only Shariputra was called the Elder Son. Without wisdom one cannot become a Buddha. Without wisdom one cannot penetrate the Dharma and without wisdom one cannot help sentient beings. The Bodhisattva Manjushri is called the Son of the Dharma King or the Prince of the Dharma. This is

similar to Shariputra's name, the Elder Son of the Buddha, and Manjushri is the Bodhisattva of Great Wisdom.

The term "Arhat" means "one who deserves offerings" or "he to whom others should make offerings." An Arhat has attained true liberation – anybody who makes offerings to an Arhat will accumulate merit. "Arhat" is a Theravada term. Theravada Buddhists believe that there can be only one Buddha at one time in a particular world system, but people can practice to become Arhats. An Arhat is completely liberated, as was Shakyamuni Buddha. However, an Arhat does not have the same wisdom, merit and virtue as the Buddha, nor does he take the enormous vow to save all sentient beings.

The next two phrases, "born from the Buddha's mouth" and "by transmission of the Dharma," are famous phrases from the *Shurangama Sutra*. Buddhists often memorize these phrases. They refer to the source of Shariputra's wisdom. Our bodies are all born from our mothers' wombs but the development of wisdom begins with the Dharma, the Buddha's words. Buddha spoke, and Shariputra heard his words and attained enlightenment. In this sense his wisdom was born from the Buddha's mouth. "By transmission of the Dharma" follows from "born from the Buddha's mouth." If Buddha had not taught the Dharma, Shariputra could not have heard it and attained Arhatship.

Even though we are not yet enlightened, are we born from the Buddha's mouth and by transmission of the Dharma? Yes, even if our wisdom is in an embryonic state, we have heard the Dharma and our wisdom is born from Buddha's mouth. We should all aspire to develop our wisdom and realize liberation.

Shariputra then said, "As the Buddha now asks about the best means of perfection, according to my personal experience, the best consists in realizing the most illuminating knowledge by means of the mind's radiant sight-perception."

There are two phrases at the end of the paragraph which need to be explained further, "the mind's radiant sight-perception," and "the most illuminating knowledge." Eye-consciousness, sight-perception, or the eye of the mind, emits light which is called "illumination," and which is described here as "radiant." When this illumination is perfect, it is the same as wisdom free from all outflows, which is here called "the most illuminating knowledge." The eye of the mind generates the light of wisdom. When the light of wisdom is perfected, it is the wisdom of the Arhat, and it can be used to help all sentient beings. *"Realizing the most illuminating knowledge by means of the mind's radiant sight-perception"* can also be translated as "the eye of the mind generates the light of wisdom, and with the perfection of that light brings about the understanding of liberation, which is for the benefit of all sentient beings." Shariputra said that his highest

experience was perfect penetration through the medium of eye-consciousness.

This is a difficult section of the *Shurangama Sutra*, and not many commentators have tried to make it clear. If I have made any mistakes in my explanation, I can only ask for forgiveness from Shakyamuni Buddha.

Complete Penetration of Ear Consciousness

May 3. 1994

We have been looking at the section of the *Shurangama Sutra* known as the Twenty-Five Kinds of Complete Penetration. What is meant by complete penetration? A complete penetration is a door or entrance through which we can discover our Buddha Nature. Buddha Nature is sometimes called our "intrinsic nature," our "original face," or "true suchness." It is what the Buddha awakened to when he realized enlightenment.

In the *Shurangama Sutra*, twenty-five complete penetrations are described by the Bodhisattvas that experienced them. These are examples of the ways we can discover our Buddha Nature. What are these twenty-five entries? They constitute the environment in which the mind functions, divided according to the traditional Buddhist understanding of the structure of that environment.

The first twelve of the twenty-five doors, or entries, to Buddha Nature consist of the six sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind) and the six sense objects (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, things touched, and the objects of the mind: thoughts, emotions, memories and the like). The six sense objects actually include all phenomena.

What is it that allows us to distinguish or discriminate between external objects? It is our sense organs coming into contact with sense objects. This contact gives rise to the sense consciousnesses, the next six of the twenty-five entries. The six sense consciousnesses are the consciousnesses of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting, and mental activities.

To give a concrete example: I use my hand, the sense organ of the body, to touch a cup, the object of the sense of touch. When my hand touches a cup, it causes an awareness that is called the consciousness of the body of touch. In addition there are the seven elements which the ancient Chinese believed made up all phenomena: earth, fire, water, wind, space, perception and consciousness. All together these add up to twenty-five, and each can be completely penetrated to reveal its Buddha Nature. To summarize: six sense organs, plus six sense objects, plus six sense consciousnesses, plus seven elements, equals twenty-five entries.

In the *Shurangama Sutra*, Bodhisattvas are categorized according to how they realized enlightenment. For example, if enlightenment is achieved because the body sense organ touched something, the Bodhisattva experienced Complete Penetration of the Sense Organ of the Body. If the experience concerns what the body touched, something hard or warm for example, then enlightenment is achieved through the Complete Penetration of the Sense Object of Touch. If it is the awareness of the contact of the body with some object that

leads to the enlightenment, then that is Complete Penetration of the Sense Consciousness of Touch.

Here is an account of an enlightenment experience that we can examine: The modern Chinese Master Hsu-yun was practicing in a Chan Hall in the cold of winter. Hot tea was often brought to the practitioners. One day, Master Hsu-yun held out his cup to receive tea, and the tea overflowed the cup, burning his hand and causing him to drop the cup. At the sound of the cup breaking, Master Hsu-yun realized enlightenment. What kind of Complete Penetration was that? The sense organ of touch or hearing? The object of hearing or of touch? Or was it the consciousness of these senses? In order to know the answer we would have to ask Master Hsu-yun. We would need to know at exactly what point he was enlightened. Only he could tell us.

Once you penetrate one door, you don't need the other entrances. When you enter, you penetrate all doors. But the point of entry is different for different people. At the Center we have two doors, one in the front and one in the back, but you don't even really need to go through a door to enter the Center. You can climb over a wall or through a window. Once you are inside it doesn't matter how you got in, but we can still talk about the path you took.

At the Center the two doors are the normal entries. However, if you climb over a wall or through a window, there is no

difference to the fact that you are inside. Of course, most people don't climb over walls. The twenty-five complete penetrations described in the *Shurangama Sutra* are the normal ways to discover our Buddha Nature, and are comparable to the two doors of the Chan Center. However, it is not impossible that there are additional ways to discover our Buddha Nature.

Let us return to the sutra and talk about Bodhisattva Samantabhadra's complete penetration through ear consciousness:

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva then rose from his seat, prostrated himself with his head at the feet of the Buddha and declared: "I was already a son of the Dharma King when formerly I was with the Tathagatas who were countless as the sands in the Ganges. All the Buddhas in the ten directions who teach their disciples to plant Bodhisattva roots, urge them to practice Samantabhadra deeds which are called after my name. World Honored One, I always use my mind to listen in order to distinguish the variety of views held by human beings. If in a place, separated from here by a number of worlds as countless as the sands in the Ganges, a living being practices Samantabhadra deeds, I mount at once a six-tusked elephant and reproduce myself in a hundred and a thousand apparitions to come to his aid. Even if he is unable to see me because of his great karmic obstruction, I secretly lay my hand on his head to protect

and comfort him so that he can succeed. As the Buddha now asks about the best means of perfection, according to my personal experience, the best consists in hearing with the mind, which leads to non-discriminative discernment.

The translator of the sutra has digested the contents of the passage besides translating it. As a result it does not contain the richness of meaning of the Chinese, so we will proceed based on the Chinese.

The name Samantabhadra can be translated as "universal virtue." "Universal" indicates several things. First, it means universal in terms of space. That is to say, Samantabhadra's virtue can exist or manifest anywhere. Wherever Samantabhadra's methods are practiced, the Bodhisattva is there, together with the practitioner. Samantabhadra's virtue is also universal in that his method is suitable for anybody in any place. Again, Samantabhadra is "universal virtue" because Samantabhadra's method is beneficial for any sentient being regardless of level of practice, virtue or karmic roots. Very experienced practitioners with deep wisdom and great merit or beginners on the Bodhisattva Path can benefit from his method.

What is this method of practice? It is the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra which are described in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*:

To worship and respect all Buddhas.
To praise the Tathagatas.
To cultivate the giving of offerings.
To repent all karmic obstructions.
To rejoice in the merits of others.
To request the turning of the Dharma Wheel.
To request that the Buddhas dwell in the world.
To always follow the Buddhas in study.
To always harmonize with living beings.
To transfer all merits to all others.

"Virtue" means that anybody at any time and place, who comes into contact with Samantabhadra's method, will benefit. It is like coming into contact with virtuous people or nutritious food. It is always beneficial. In this sense, too, Samantabhadra represents universal virtue.

Samantabhadra says, *"I was already a son of the Dharma King..."* In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, two great Bodhisattvas are called sons of the Dharma King – Manjushri and Samantabhadra. However, Manjushri is also known as the mother of the Buddhas in the three times of past, present and future, while Samantabhadra is called the eldest son of the Buddha. In what sense is Manjushri mother of the Buddhas? He preceded the Buddhas because he represents wisdom, and wisdom is the foundation of Buddhism. Without wisdom one cannot become a Buddha.

Samantahhadra is called the elder son of the Buddha (the Dharma King) because he represents the virtuous action of a Bodhisattva, as expressed in the Ten Great Vows. The number ten is used to represent perfection. The Ten Great Vows incorporate all the virtuous activities of all Bodhisattvas within their general categories. Anyone who practices Samantabhadra's vows is the elder son of the Dharma King and should be able to become a Buddha soon. But Samantabhadra remains the elder son. What kind of a prince is this? Who wants to be a prince eternally and never attain the throne?

In the sutra, Samantabhadra says, *"I was already a son of the Dharma King when formerly I was with the Tathagatas who were countless as the sands in the Ganges."* If you think about it, this means that Samantabhadra is the oldest son of Buddhas as countless as the grains of sand in the Ganges River. Countless sentient beings have attained Buddhahood, and yet Samantabhadra remains the Prince of the Dharma King and has not become a Buddha. Why do you think that is?

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva represents two things. First, he represents the activities of a Bodhisattva. Second, he represents what anyone who practices like him will become. Anyone who practices his vows becomes Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. There can be thousands, tens of thousands, even millions of Samantabhadra Bodhisattvas. All of them are the

same Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. They are identical. The Chinese say that whoever provides the milk is the mother. In the same sense, whoever has the virtue and the abilities of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva *is* Samantabhadra Bodhisattva.

When I was in Vancouver I met identical twin brothers. Even their voices and facial expressions were the same. Both were very good photographers. I often confused them. I would say to one, "Yesterday you did this for me," and he would say, "I wasn't here yesterday. That was my brother."

This went on and on. Finally I said to them, "My inability to tell the difference between you two may be excused, but what about your children? Can they tell the difference?" They said that their children often mistook one brother for the other until they reached their teens. "And your wives?" They said that their wives could tell. These brothers are almost identical, but not as identical as Samantabhadra and a person whose practice is at his level. When a person's practice is at the level of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, he *is* Samantabhadra.

The text goes on: *"All the Buddhas in the ten directions who teach their disciples to plant Bodhisattva roots, urge them to practice Samantabhadra deeds which are called after my name."*

All of us on the Bodhisattva path should practice

Samantabhadra's vows. The practice of Samantabhadra's vows is the complete Bodhisattva Path. We can start by practicing on an elementary level. We start by practicing them partially until we reach the point where we can practice them completely. Bodhisattva practice incorporates the virtuous activities of all Bodhisattvas. Other ways of practice may only be appropriate for a particular stage or part of the Bodhisattva path.

What is the Complete Penetration of the Consciousness of Hearing? It is not hearing with the sense organ of the ear, but rather it is hearing with the mind and it is not done with the discriminating mind, but with a pure mind. With a pure mind, the Bodhisattva listens to the thoughts of all sentient beings so that he can understand their thoughts, their understanding, their orientation, and so on.

Samantabhadra says, *"World honored One. I always use my mind to listen in order to distinguish the variety of views of human beings."*

Samantabhadra listens so well that he can hear the thoughts of a sentient being extremely far away, separated from him by worlds as countless as sands in the Ganges River.

"If in a place separated from here by a number of worlds as countless as the sands in the Ganges, a living being practices Samantabhadra deeds, I mount at once a six-

tusked elephant and reproduce myself in a hundred and a thousand apparitions to come to his aid."

If a sentient being generates Samantabhadra's vow and wants to practice the Bodhisattva Path, Samantabhadra will go there and help him or her. In fact, the Bodhisattva will manifest in hundreds and thousands of emanations, and each will go, riding a six-tusked elephant, to help a being that has made these vows.

What does the six-tusked elephant represent? It is also mentioned in the *Lotus Sutra*, in the chapter on the Contemplation of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, where it states that wherever sentient beings take Samantabhadra's vows, Samantabhadra will go to help them riding on a six-tusked white elephant. The *Shurangama Sutra* does not say that the elephant is white, but the color white represents the purity of the Bodhisattva's activities.

Why does the elephant Samantabhadra rides have six tusks? The six tusks represent the Six Paramitas of Buddhism: giving, following the precepts, patience, diligence, concentration, and wisdom. I said earlier that the vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva encompass and represent all Bodhisattva activities. The six tusks of the elephant represent the Six Paramitas and so also represent all the myriad activities of Bodhisattvas. These tusks are both useful and ornamental. The Six Paramitas are used to help sentient beings, and they

are an adornment of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva.

Samantabhadra says, of a person who takes his vows, *"Even if he is unable to see me because of his great karmic obstruction, I secretly lay my hand on his head to protect and comfort him so that he can succeed."* If the practitioner does not have too many karmic obstructions he may he able to see Samantabhadra Bodhisattva in front of him riding on a six-tusked elephant.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's description of his complete penetration is different from the descriptions of the other twenty-four Bodhisattvas who speak in this section of the *Shurangama Sutra*. The other Bodhisattva disciples of the Buddha explain their enlightenment, while Samantabhadra Bodhisattva explains how he helps others. He says that he helps whoever aspires to practice his vows. Finally, Samantabhadra talks a little bit about his own practice, but he does not explain exactly how he realized enlightenment.

He says, *"As the Buddha now asks about the best means of perfection, according to my personal experience, the best consists in hearing with the mind, which leads to non-discriminative discernment.*"

He does tell us, then, that he realized enlightenment through hearing with the mind.

Why did listening with the mind and the complete penetration of the consciousness of hearing lead Samantabhadra to make the ten great vows? That is not explained. But once Samantabhadra experienced complete penetration of the consciousness of hearing, he had no obstruction to his wisdom and reached the highest attainment.

How is Samantabhadra's Complete Penetration of the Consciousness of Hearing relevant? What good does it do us, who do not have complete penetration of the consciousness of hearing? How can we make use of this?

Question: You said that Samantabhadra's vows are appropriate for practitioners at all levels. How can we use them if we are at a beginning level?

Master Sheng Yen: This is a very important point. We can use Samantabhadra's vows to follow the Bodhisattva Path because Samantabhadra's activities encompass all Bodhisattva activities from the most elementary to the most advanced. But what does an elementary level of Bodhisattva activity mean? The important thing to understand is how we must listen. Not just with our ears, but our minds must listen to the minds of others. Do not be limited by what you hear, by the words that are chosen, but try to understand the mind of the person who is talking. Rely on the consciousness of hearing. This is not easy, but it is important. It takes practice.

I knew a mother who had to be away from home for a few months. When she returned her daughter began to cry. The child beat, kicked and yelled at her mother, saying. “I don’t want you to come back. I don’t want you to come back!” But what were the child’s true feelings? I’m sure she meant the opposite of what she said.

Do not listen only to words. Try to listen to the hearts and minds of the people around you.

Avalokiteshvara's Complete Penetration through Hearing

Part One

November 19, 1995

In the section of the *Shurangama Sutra* we have been reading, the Buddha questioned twenty-five Bodhisattvas about the methods they used to attain complete penetration. We have now come to the paragraph in which Avalokiteshvara speaks:

Thereupon Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva rose from his seat, prostrated himself with his head at the feet of the Buddha and declared: "I still remember that long before numbers of eons countless as the sand grains in the Ganges, a Buddha called Avalokiteshvara appeared in the world. When I was with him I developed the bodhi mind and, for my entry into samadhi, I was instructed by him to practice meditation by means of the organ of hearing."

Avalokiteshvara tells about the distant past, countless eons ago. Even one eon is an extremely long period of time. At this remote time he encountered a Buddha whose name was also Avalokiteshvara, and it was this Buddha who taught him how to practice. It is Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva who speaks. Who is he? Among other things, he is a major Bodhisattva in the Western Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha. In fact, he is heir to the position of Buddha in that Buddha Land. When

Amitabha passes into parinirvana, Avalokiteshvara will be the Buddha of this Western Pure Land. Perhaps the name will be changed then. Or maybe there is some obscure clause in the constitution of the Western Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha that says, "No name changes!" What do you think?

When will Avalokiteshvara become the Buddha of the Western Pure Land? This is an interesting question, because the name "Amitabha" means "infinite life," or, "immeasurable lifetime." Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva was enlightened and became a Bodhisattva an unimaginably long time ago. He may yet wait many more eons before he attains full Buddhahood. Fortunately, he is extremely patient. He is content as a Bodhisattva. After all, he has no attachment to the idea of becoming a Buddha. It is only we ignorant sentient beings who are attached to the idea of becoming Buddhas.

This is a crucial point to remember. A Bodhisattva has no anticipation or expectation of attainment for him or herself. Avalokiteshvara is not concerned about becoming a Buddha. A Bodhisattva simply dedicates his or her efforts to helping sentient beings.

When Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva was with the Buddha also named Avalokiteshvara, he aroused Bodhi Mind, the aspiration to attain the highest enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Once he had done this, the Buddha

Avalokiteshvara taught him a method of contemplation and practice using the organ of hearing by which he was able to enter samadhi.

The samadhi referred to here is the same as enlightenment. It is what is referred to in Chan as "illuminating the mind and seeing one's nature." The word "samadhi" has several meanings in Buddhist sutras. Most commonly, it refers to deep meditative absorption or concentration. Dhyana also refers to that state. Such samadhi can be attained by practitioners seeking worldly benefits, in which case, it is part of worldly dharmas and worldly practice. Meditative absorption samadhi can also be part of a practice which transcends worldly phenomena. Both Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhists practice samadhi of this nature.

What are the differences among these samadhis? Mahayana samadhi is attained by Mahayana Bodhisattvas. Sentient beings in this state remain in samadhi during daily activities. Whether they give Dharma talks, help sentient beings, meditate, make trades on the floor of a stock exchange, or engage in any other activity, Mahayana Bodhisattvas remain in samadhi.

How does this differ from the state of mind of an ordinary sentient being? A Bodhisattva has no attachment to or concern about what he does or the results of what he does. He has no vexations, nor does he experience emotions, such

as happiness, sadness, anger, and excitement, as ordinary sentient beings do. Helping sentient beings is his only concern, and he naturally does whatever is necessary to bring them peace and help them progress in the Dharma.

There are two kinds of Hinayana Arhats. One kind attains Arhatship through samadhi, and the other attains this state without experiencing samadhi. Like Mahayana Bodhisattvas, those who attain Arhatship through samadhi are free from vexations, both in meditation and in daily life. They are free from self attachment. However they differ from Bodhisattvas in that they do not have the aspiration to help sentient beings. Such Arhats tend to spend their time in meditation.

When one enters worldly samadhi, there seem to be no vexations and no emotional fluctuations or moods. But self-centeredness remains. This is very different from the samadhi of the Arhat, in which all self-centeredness has been eliminated. A practitioner in the state of deep concentration of worldly samadhi may feel as if he is liberated from all vexations, but once he stops meditating the power of his samadhi will subside, and once again he will experience vexations. How will he respond in that case? He may return to meditation to avoid the vexations of daily life. This behavior is similar to that of the Arhat, but for a different reason. The Arhat returns to meditation not because he experiences vexations – he does not – but only because there is nothing left for him to do. This is because, unlike the Bodhisattva, he

has not vowed to help all sentient beings.

Meditative absorption samadhi often entails dwelling on, or contemplating, an idea. Concentration is reached through contemplation practice. Hearing is not usually associated with this kind of samadhi practice. However the sutra does not speak of meditative absorption, it is refers to the samadhi which is enlightenment.

In the sutra, Avalokiteshvara goes on to say: *"At first by directing the organ of hearing into the stream of meditation, both the stream and the subject which enters become quiescent. Both movement and stillness became clearly non-existent."*

The method that the Buddha Avalokiteshvara taught the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is this: first simply hear, go on to contemplation, and then to practice. You begin by hearing or listening to sound as you ordinarily would. Eventually, you progress to listening to the sound without sound, that is, silent sound. This happens when the practitioner and sound are no longer separate. At that point sound does not exist as such, but the practitioner still continues to hear. (In this case I am using "hear" and "listen" interchangeably.)

Eventually, your physical and/or mental energy are no longer sufficient to maintain this state, and you stray from the state of non-separation from sound. This loss of energy also happens

when you use other methods of practice. For example, if you use the method of counting breaths and you are doing well, you will reach a state in which the self, the breathing, and the counting are no longer separate. But you cannot remain in this state indefinitely. Eventually your physical and/or mental energy dwindles, and you drop away from that state. Then you need to use the method of contemplation.

When I say contemplation, I do not mean that you use your reasoning mind to think about an idea. Contemplation means to develop and maintain a certain peaceful, quiet state of mind. Do not become discouraged, or anxious for any result. Contemplation and hearing are not really separate. You hear by using the continuous, quiet, state of mind which is contemplation.

The third part of meditation by means of the organ of hearing is practice, or cultivation. It requires that in all situations, at all times, you maintain hearing and contemplation. I stated that when you meditate by means of the organ of hearing, you begin by hearing, then you reach a state of non-separation from what you hear, and eventually your energy is insufficient to sustain that state, and you go on to contemplation. I also said that you should maintain this practice at all times. In reality, hearing, contemplation and cultivation are simultaneous events. They are not separate. They may be sequential in the beginning, but as you get deeper into the practice, these three actions occur simultaneously.

When I teach meditation, I often talk about contemplation, illumination, and "bringing up," meaning to bring the method back up after you have been distracted by wandering thoughts. Contemplation, illumination and bringing up are all part of the method, and they happen sequentially. But in meditation by means of the organ of hearing, hearing, contemplation and cultivation are simultaneous.

Those of you who practice meditation probably have some sense of what I am talking about. If you have not practiced meditation, then you probably feel like someone who has never eaten beef, lamb, or pork listening to someone else trying to describe how different each one tastes. No amount of explaining can give you a concrete understanding of the difference. I can explain hearing, contemplation and cultivation in meditation to you, but if you want to know what beef, lamb or pork tastes like, I'll be of no help. Sorry, but I'm a vegetarian!

Avalokiteshvara said, *"...for my entry into samadhi, I was instructed by him (Avalokiteshvara Buddha) to practice meditation by means of the organ of hearing."* As I said earlier, in this case samadhi means samadhi with wisdom, or enlightenment. How did Avalokiteshvara enter into samadhi? He did it through hearing, contemplation, and cultivation. Through these he opened up wisdom. Entering into samadhi and the opening of wisdom are simultaneous.

The next lines which Avalokiteshvara said are extremely important. Even if you don't understand, at least you will have listened to them: *"At first by directing the organ of hearing into the stream of meditation, this organ was detached from its object, and by wiping out the concept of both sound and stream-entry, both disturbance and stillness became clearly non-existent."*

First you listen in the conventional way, with your ears, but eventually your ears stop functioning, and you use your mind to hear. When you close your eyes, can you still see? Sometimes we say, "I can see what you are saying." Do we mean that we are using our eyes or ears? And again, when we listen to someone talk, sometimes we become aware of a nonverbal message. In English we say we "read between the lines." Do you read between the lines with your ears or your mind?

In the past, in romantic relationships in China, the woman would often say the reverse of what she meant, and the man was expected to determine her true feelings from her tone and other aspects of her expression. For instance, if you proposed to a woman, the woman might say, "I would prefer to marry a dog than to marry you," and you would then have to figure out what she was really saying. In this instance would you listen with your ears or your mind?

Let's return to meditation by means of the organ of hearing.

When you engage in meditation by means of the organ of sound, initially you use your ears to hear, but at a certain point your sense organ of hearing ceases to function. Your mind continues to hear, however. You hear silent sound. Please don't get the wrong idea and conclude that there is some kind of mystical sound emanating from within your body. That is an outer path. It is not true Dharma practice.

Is there any sound to this silent sound? In this state, we can say that you maintain a continuity of energy. When this energy is maintained with no interruption, we can say that you are hearing. Have you heard the koan from the Japanese Zen tradition about the sound of one hand clapping? One Master asked, "Can you hear me clapping with one hand?" And a second Master answered, "Yes, I heard it." The first Master asked, "What is this sound like?" and the second Master said, "It's like thunder pounding on my ears." Real or false? Perhaps the Masters were joking, but the sound could be real. If you clap with your mind, I can hear it with my mind.

Someone who is angry may strike something, a table, perhaps. If you are the object of his anger, then you might feel like he is striking directly at your heart or mind even though there is no physical contact. The sound of his striking the table might almost be painful. Have you experienced this kind of hearing? Most probably, we have all experienced something similar.

Returning to this practice: at a certain point there is no longer separation between the subject (the one who is hearing), and the object (that which is heard). Still, hearing continues. Avalokiteshvara said, *"...directing the organ into the stream of meditation..."* The stream of meditation is the uninterrupted stream of silent sound. When the practitioner enters the uninterrupted stream of silent sound, or sound without sound, he has forgotten about himself he has forgotten that he is in the stream, and he has forgotten the stream itself.

Next Avalokiteshvara said, *"...both the stream and the subject which enters become quiescent. Both movement and stillness become clearly non-existent."* This means that both the subject which enters the stream and the object – the stream which is entered – become quiescent. "Quiescent" describes a state of stillness, but the practitioner in that state has no perception or experience of stillness or movement.

This state in which there is no perception of stillness or movement is Mahayana samadhi. The ordinary, worldly kind of samadhi is also a kind of stillness. But a practitioner in Mahayana samadhi is not moved by the environment or by emotions. He has no intention of holding his mind still. There is no intentionality, and there is no movement whatsoever.

The state in which there is no perception of stillness or movement is beyond the state just described in the sutra,

as *"directing the organ of hearing into the stream of meditation, both the stream and the subject which enters become quiescent."* This is called "entering the stream and forgetting the object," and it is a samadhi state which occurs during meditation. But when, both movement and stillness become clearly non-existent, when there is no perception of movement or stillness, this state persists at all times, during meditation or daily activities.

At this level of development you can do "Chan practice at busy crossroads." This does not mean that you actually sit down and meditate in an intersection. It means that there is neither stillness nor movement in your mind, no matter what you do. You can eat ice cream, walk your dog, buy groceries; yet both disturbance and stillness become clearly non-existent. You should find this especially useful. Remember you can practice Chan all the time: at work, at home, even shopping through the aisles at your supermarket!

Avalokiteshvara's Complete Penetration through Hearing

Part Two

December 3, 1995

At first, by directing the organ of hearing into the stream of meditation, both the stream and the subject which enters it became quiescent. Both movement and stillness were clearly non-existent. Thus, advancing step by step, both hearing and its object ceased completely. But I did not stop when they ended. Not abiding in awareness of this state, both the awareness and the object of awareness were realized as empty. Enlightenment became perfect. Both creation and extinction were extinguished and the state of Nirvana manifested.

In this section of the *Shurangama Sutra*, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva talks about complete penetration through the sense organ of hearing, and the levels that lead to it. Avalokiteshvara says, *"At first, by directing the organ of hearing into the stream of meditation, both the stream and the subject which enters it became quiescent. Both movement and stillness were clearly non-existent."* As I have said before, this is the first level of penetration.

The next level of penetration is described in the next sentence: *"Thus, advancing step by step, both hearing and*

its object ceased completely."

And then the third stage: *"Not abiding in awareness of this state, both the awareness and the object of awareness were realized as empty."*

"Enlightenment became perfect," is a description of the fourth level.

Finally there is a summary, *"Both creation and extinction are extinguished and the state of Nirvana manifested,"* which describes complete penetration.

These levels of realization or penetration are subtle. It is impossible to truly understand them conceptually. You must experience them yourself. To talk about them intellectually is a little like talking about the theory of military strategy without any actual experience in battle. However, I will try to explain them.

Let us return to the first level: *"At first by directing the organ of hearing into the stream of meditation, both the stream and the subject which enters it became quiescent. Both movement and stillness were clearly non-existent."*

Movement and stillness refer to what one receives from the external environment. Movement is sound, what you hear, and stillness is when you do not hear anything. Both

movement and stillness are received through the sense organ of hearing. If both movement and stillness are clearly non-existent, is there anything left in the external environment which can be said to exist? Stillness and movement are two ideas or feelings which are relative to each other. Only with the cessation of movement can you know stillness, only relative to stillness can you know movement. When neither movement nor stillness exists, we can say that the external environment has no existence.

Avalokiteshvara describes the second level of penetration: *"Thus, advancing step by step, both hearing and its object ceased completely..."* Movement and stillness come from the external environment. They are the object of hearing. In the first stage of penetration, only the environment has no existence. The self (the subject) and the functioning of the sense organs are still present. In the second stage the subject who senses is also seen to have no existence. These two levels are not so different. As with all of these levels, it is a matter of gradation. One step naturally leads to another.

Avalokiteshvara talked about penetration using the sense organ of hearing, in this case, but these levels of penetration apply to all sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind).

The experience of cessation of object and subject need not happen when you sit in meditation. It may happen during

any daily activity. A teacher who is not very clear about the situation may misinterpret such an experience and cite it as an experience of enlightenment. But a good teacher, or a great teacher like the ancient masters, will not affirm a practitioner's realization so easily. He or she will ask the practitioner a variety of questions which will elicit to what degree, if any, an enlightenment experience has occurred. There is no hiding. Nevertheless, to have the experience of the cessation of hearing and its object, even temporarily, is very good.

At the second level, the word "completely" is very important. Subject and object cease completely, which means that henceforth the practitioner is no longer subject to the influence or disturbance of the senses. It is a difficult state to reach. It is a kind of Mahayana samadhi, called "the purity of the six sense organs." At this second level your sense organs function, you can hear, see, etc., but you are completely undisturbed by what your senses encounter. As you can imagine, such a state is not easily attainable.

If you have eaten and you are full, and you are not tempted to eat even by your favorite food, you may feel that you have attained purity of the six sense organs. Later, when you feel hungry again, and you smell your favorite food, you might even say to yourself, "I have attained purity of the six sense organs. I will not eat." Is this purity of the six sense organs? Do you refrain from eating because you don't have the

thought to eat, or because you dare not eat?

When you have attained purity of the six sense organs, you eat out of need, not out of attachment to the taste of food. You will not be greedy for food, like a hungry ghost. If there is nothing to eat, or eating is inappropriate, you will not salivate. There will be no thought of food.

If a Bodhisattva who has attained purity of the six sense organs encounters someone who is sexually attractive, no thought of desire will arise. The Bodhisattva will not react physiologically or psychologically. There will be no temptation. This is purity of the six sense organs, and it is also freedom of the six sense organs. Most of us are easily tempted. We may be able to resist temptation, but we recognize that we feel tempted. A Bodhisattva who has attained purity of the six sense organs feels no such temptation. Precepts are followed and kept pure.

Avalokiteshvara describes the next level as, *"Not abiding in the awareness of this state, both the awareness and object of awareness are realized as empty."* "This state" refers to the second level, in which both hearing and the object of hearing cease. At the third level, the practitioner is not abiding in the awareness of the second level. Both the awareness and the object of awareness are empty. In Chinese, the character for "awareness" and "enlightenment" is the same (chueh). Here, "awareness" means the six consciousnesses,

which were purified of all vexation in the second stage. This "awareness" is the wisdom of the practitioner, which realizes emptiness. The "object of awareness" refers to the six sense organs, the six sense objects (things we can see, hear, smell, taste, touch or perceive with our minds), and the six sense consciousnesses. These are the eighteen realms. At the third level, all eighteen realms are realized as empty. The first twelve are the objects of awareness and the last six, the consciousnesses, are referred to together as "awareness" here, because they have been purified of all vexations.

The second stage, when hearing and the object of hearing cease "completely", is called "emptiness of personal self." The third stage, when both awareness and the object of awareness are empty, is called "emptiness of the dharma of self."

Put concisely: in the second stage both hearing and the object of hearing cease completely. In the third stage, all eighteen realms – the six sense organs, the six sense objects, and even the six sense consciousnesses – the "objects" of a higher level of awareness, are emptied. Awareness, in this sense, is wisdom.

The nature of the state where awareness and the object of awareness are both empty may seem confusing. Actually it's quite simple. In Chinese there is a phrase literally translated as "put down" (fang hs'ia). But "put down" has a different

connotation in English, so we use an equivalent phrase, "leave behind." If you can "put down" everything or "leave behind" everything, including the idea of leaving behind everything, then you have reached the point when awareness and the object of awareness are both empty. If you think, "I have put down everything. I have left behind everything," then you are holding on to the idea of putting down, of letting go, of leaving behind.

A practitioner told his master, "Master, I have put down everything. Now I feel so free! There is nothing for me to hold on to." The Master responded, "This is heavier than Mount Sumeru!" In ancient Indian mythology, Mount Sumeru was the center of the universe, and reached from heaven to hell. If the disciple had already left behind everything, and felt so free and at ease, why did his Master say that this was heavier than Mount Sumeru? Can anybody answer this question?

Student: The master says he is heavier because he still hasn't let go of the fact that he has let go. There still is the duality of having let go or leaving. He has not left that. He is still holding on to it.

Master Sheng Yen: Ah yes, so smart! Now we go to the next level, "Enlightenment (awareness) became perfect." At the fourth level the emptiness of awareness (enlightenment) reaches completion. Completion means that both emptiness as well as the object which has been emptied and extinguished.

The practitioner reaches the perfection of Buddhahood.

This can be simply explained. Let's imagine I have a cup of water. Next, I drink the water, so the cup is empty. Next I empty or let go of the idea of the emptiness of the cup. I can proceed further, but to do so I don't need to say anything more. Earlier I could still say I'm letting go of the idea of emptiness. When I proceed to let go of the idea I can no longer say anything.

At this level you completely let go of emptiness, the object of emptiness and any idea of the completion of emptiness. At the highest level of emptiness you completely drop all of these considerations and concepts.

Finally, Avalokiteshvara summarizes, *"Both creation and extinction were extinguished and the state of Nirvana manifested."* "Creation and extinction…" refer to all concepts of existence, nonexistence, emptiness, non-emptiness, gain, extinction, etc.

The first two stages involve creation and extinguishing. In the first stage, the practitioner "gains" a realization, and movement and stillness are "extinguished." In the second stage, the practitioner advances step by step, "gaining" deeper realization and both hearing and its object are "extinguished." The third and fourth steps involve only extinguishing. And finally, there is a summary.

In the process of proceeding through these levels, the wisdom you have in the beginning grows to become the complete wisdom of the Buddha. When you can let go of even the complete wisdom of the Buddha, then that is genuine completion. That is genuine quiescence.

Does completion of penetration mean that there is no need to deliver sentient beings? There is no need to do anything?

Student: No!
Master Sheng Yen: Ah! When penetration is complete, everything is as it is. No matter what you consider good, no matter what you consider bad, everything is as it is. There is no need to seek or to abandon, or to increase or decrease anything. Whatever needs to be done, a Bodhisattva still proceeds to do, but it is done without attachment.

The expression, "Everything is as it is" has to be understood very clearly. When you have no attachment whatsoever, then "everything is as it is" for you. You will not create any problems and you will not let anything distress you. However, if you still have vexations, you cannot just say, "Everything is as it is," and think that it is true. As long as you experience anything as a problem, you had better work on it.

This paragraph from the sutra that we have discussed is deep and difficult to understand. There is really nothing more that

I can say about it. Years ago I said to an old Dharma Master, "It seems that in your Dharma talks, you just touch on the most important and difficult points in the sutra, and cover them in a couple of sentences. Yet you spend a lot of time talking about the beginning of the sutra, where the content seems simple and basic. Why do you do that?" His response was quite interesting.

He said, "There's no need to add anything to the part of the text which is already so rich and complex. It is only the beginning, which is so ordinary, or mundane, which I try to embellish and enrich." When you come to a point in a sutra which is really splendid and subtle, it is simply not possible to give an explanation.

I'm happy that I have managed to say a little about this difficult paragraph. If you are confused, then you can wait till you attain Buddhahood and you will understand. If you do not have faith that what we discussed today is important, it doesn't matter. By the time you reach Buddhahood you will have faith.

Other Books in English by Master Sheng Yen

(A partial listing)

Things Pertaining to Bodhi
The Thirty-Seven Aids to Enlightenment
Shambhala Publications 2010

Shattering the Great Doubt
The Chan Practice of Huatou
Shambhala Publications 2009

The Method of No-Method
The Chan Practice of Silent Illumination
Shambhala Publications 2008

Footprints in the Snow
The Autobiography of a Chinese Buddhist Monk
Doubleday 2008

Orthodox Chinese Buddhism
A Contemporary Chan Master's Answers to Common Questions
North Atlantic Books 2007

Attaining the Way
A Guide to the Practice of Chan Buddhism
Shambhala Publications 2006

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Wisdom from the Zen Classic Xin Ming
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