

This talk by the Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin is the fifth and final talk of the mahayana study period at the 1988 Vajradhatu Seminary.

PRAJNAPARAMITA

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The discussion of the sixth paramita, *prajna*, and the experience that results from *prajna*, is a central theme in all of the Buddha's teaching. The *prajnaparamita* is the heart of Buddhist practice because it can liberate all of our notions about spirituality and transcend the realms of theism altogether. We experience *prajna* in the *hinayana*, the *mahayana*, and the *vajrayana* stages of the path. In all of these stages, it is the same *prajna*; however, in our experience that *prajna* becomes progressively clearer.

There are two types of *prajna*, higher and lower; the *prajna* we are discussing is higher *prajna*. Higher *prajna* sees reality as it is and is known as supreme knowledge, unconditional knowledge. This knowledge is quite different from conditioned knowledge, which is based on knowing one thing or another. Higher *prajna* is just knowing, simply knowing, and that knowing is the same as wakefulness, because

like wakefulness, higher prajna is free from the two veils of emotionality and ignorance. In that way, the essence of prajna is freedom.

On the Buddhist path it is said that without prajna there is no way to attain enlightenment because we would have no way to view our journey. Prajna is that which enables us both to have a view altogether and to engage that view. The mahayana view of the paramitas teaches that the first five paramitas of generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, and meditation are skillful means, or *upaya*, and that prajna and upaya are always interdependent. Therefore, without prajna, the first five paramita practices would be only a surface discipline, almost like tidying up. Joined with prajna, those upayas become transcendent action, which is the meaning of paramita. They are without any reference to ego, and therefore they are completely accomplished. Generosity is complete with prajna. Discipline is complete with prajna. Patience, exertion, and meditation are complete with prajna.

How is prajna developed? It is important to understand that prajna is not a philosophical term or a philosophical teaching, and it should not be deified in that way. Because prajna is active, it is connected to practice and to effort. Therefore, it is said that prajna is developed. It is altogether the working basis of our meditation practice. In the hinayana, prajna is developed out of our practice of *shamatha*, mindfulness. The prajna of shamatha is the development of precision,

or directness. The prajna of the awareness practice of *vipashyana* is openness, or inquisitiveness, the understanding of the transparent quality of boundary. When shamatha and vipashyana are joined together, they bring about the openness that sees clearly.

What does prajna see? Prajna sees exactly what is, all the time, moment to moment. With infant prajna, sometimes we have wakefulness and sometimes we don't. When we stabilize our shamatha practice and can rest the mind without struggle, then we give birth to vipashyana, which is the experience of 360-degree awareness. Further, when we let go of the boundary of that awareness, our experience builds to the point where wakefulness begins to take over. As prajna develops further, wakefulness becomes part of our being, part of our practice, and we could say that it takes over our practice.

At this point, we begin to activate prajna because we are able to be very clear about what to accept and what to reject. From the view of prajna, accepting and rejecting—or abandoning and adopting, which mean the same—is what is known as discriminating awareness, and at this stage discriminating awareness becomes part of our practice. This is a very significant stage. Up to this point, we have been practicing in a good but somewhat naive way; but at the stage of developing paramita, which means *gone beyond*, we need the kind of prajna that can discriminate, or separate dharmas. That prajna knows the difference between one thing and another and, especially in terms of practice,

reflects life altogether. When that prajna is operating, we are no longer forgetful of our practice and our life. When we are not forgetful, we become like a warrior, a *bodhisattva*, because we overcome the fear that is due to forgetfulness. Prajna is so sharp and so awake that we remember the basic dharmas continually, and when obstacles arise, such as attacks of the *maras* or the tendency to slip into the behavior of the lower realms, we can easily cut, or discard, or dissolve such eruptions.

That activity forms the basis of paramita practice; but then prajna goes further: Prajna becomes our meditative technique in the sense that it becomes the tool by which we pierce the two veils of grasping and fixation and cut through the twofold ego of self and other. Prajna is described as a sword, a weapon, or a tool, which means that it is effective. The sword of prajna cuts both ways: it cuts oneself, which is what you hang on to as your ego fixation, and it cuts your projection, which is what you grasp as *other*. When you cut both ego fixation and grasping, then you experience the basic truth, which is called *shunyata*. *Shunya* means “empty,” and *ta* means “ness,” so *shunyata* means “empty-ness.” This is the heart, the basic teaching, the basic truth of the Buddha's discovery.

How do we do this? First, through the practice of shamatha, we experience peacefulness with ourselves. Then we experience the intelligence and inquisitiveness of vipashyana, and that gives rise to

maitri, tenderness. That in turn gives rise to the radiation of tenderness, which is compassion. Because of that it is possible to experience *shunyata*, which means experience without reference point: no reference point to oneself, no reference point to one's projections, and no reference point to experience itself. However, we could never travel that path without tenderness, because without generating kindness to ourselves and others, we could not trust the groundlessness of *shunyata*. The thread of tenderheartedness continues throughout our entire journey in the mahayana, and when we come upon the experience of the quintessence, the truth of the Buddha's teaching, we could say that tenderness is the direct cause, because it is simply the way things appear to evolve. But the greater cause is our meditation practice; and the ultimate cause is *shunyata*, or emptiness.

What is experience without reference point? According to the teachings, it is the experience of what is known as the three-fold purity: The meditator, the process of meditation, and what is being meditated upon are completely empty. Even the practice itself does not exist. And when we experience practice as nonexistent, then our mind is open, which is the state of emptiness, or *shunyata*. Our mind is fully open, and even awareness is no big deal. *Shunyata* meditation practice, if we could use such a term, is said to be externally, internally, and absolutely empty. Externally empty means that all of phenomena, all of the sensory world is seen as empty—empty of any reference point, empty of

any preconception, empty of any self-nature. Internally, emotions are seen to be empty. However, this external and internal emptiness is not devoid of vividness. It is possible, and it happens, that even though we perceive phenomena as empty, there is still vividness. It is the same with emotions; they are perceived as empty, yet vivid. And absolutely empty means that there is no project whatsoever, and there is nothing to do. So in shunyata meditation we are in a state of no occupation, which is the same as two-fold egolessness.

What is the actual experience of shunyata? Shunyata is not some fantastic experience or monumental breakthrough. Beginners like ourselves who study these teachings and contemplate shunyata have a tendency to think of shunyata as a kind of pop-gun approach: at some point all the air will be compressed, and pop!—we will experience two-fold egolessness. Not so. The experience of shunyata is a simple gap. The past is running down, and the future hasn't happened yet. There is a simple moment in between our memories and our expectations, just a little space, a little gap. However, that gap is full of possibilities, and it is totally unconditional. We should not confuse that gap with the *alaya*, which is already conditioned or tainted with a sense of self. In your practice it is important to distinguish between the two.

Ordinarily, we associate the experience of this unconditioned gap, or moment, with hope and fear. Frequently, we associate it with bodily sensations of hope and fear—our anticipation of something about to

happen and our depression about what has just passed leave us feeling hollow and quivering. That experience of being in between, that gap, has to do with fundamentally not knowing what to do. Nothing whatsoever comes up as motivation or concept. Ordinarily, we would say this is the state of ignorance. That ignorance state would cause fear because, from ego's point of view, ignorance is the worst thing. However, from the view of prajna, which sees shunyata—or which gives birth to shunyata, which is the same—ignorance is fertile ground, and that gap is a birthplace of prajnaparamita. Such a situation only occurs when we run out of the ammunition of concepts. Again, it's nothing much; just a moment of not coming up with anything. But the experience of prajna can penetrate that unknowing, and we can see that it is actually the thread, the space of things as they are.

There are two types of shunyata: *kündzop* and *döndam*. *Kündzop* is said to be empty of itself, by itself; and *döndam* is said to be empty of other. *Kündzop*, in our experience, is the experience of filling the gaps, constantly. However, at some point, *kündzop* runs out of gas. Therefore, it is possible to experience the emptiness of *kündzop*. *Döndam* is the background of all that is perceived as *kündzop*. It has no relative reference, and therefore it is empty of other, and therefore it is full of possibilities. The shunyata of *döndam* is shunyata with no reference point, and therefore it is totally itself, which is empty yet full and absolutely unique.

What is the point of all this? Well, there is no point, and that is precisely why we can be reasonable people. That is precisely why we can be compassionate in dealing with each other and with our world, and why we can work with ordinary situations without strategies and calculations of all kinds. The experience of shunyata shows that there is room for everything in our life, and in particular, it shows us how to handle the problems of society, which is the work, or the path of the bodhisattva. And it doesn't matter what kind of society, whether it's enlightened society or unenlightened. For each of us, as a would-be bodhisattva, having experienced shunyata, we become wakeful, and when that experience is established in our practice and our being, wakefulness is continuous, and the paramitas become simply the adornments of the bodhisattva. In other words, there is effortless activity which benefits all beings.

If you have any questions, we could have a discussion.

STUDENT: Sir, you said that the practice itself does not exist. It seems that at that very moment you would experience everything as inescapable. Would you say that?

VAJRA REGENT: From the view of prajna seeing things as they are, yes.

S: And out of that, you see that everything is in some way inescapable?

VR: What do you mean by *everything*?

S: That there is no longer any sense of being able to put something aside or to want something.

VR: From the view of knowing what to accept and reject, that's correct. But further on, that doesn't matter.

S: Sometimes prajna can be accompanied by *prana*.

VR: Do you mean breathing?

S: Yes. It just happens.

VR: That's right.

S: The insights you have been talking about in relation to shamatha-vipashyana practice and the development of prajna can sometimes also be experienced by what you might call the spontaneous arising of prana.

VR: Sure. And sometimes it can be experienced when you get hit with a rock!

S: Yes, or a death in the family.

VR: Yes, something like that—a shock. Basically, it has to do with gap, but I think that in the practice of sitting meditation, it's much more ordinary.

S: Especially the practices of the first five paramitas?

VR: Or the practice of sitting meditation.

S: Yes.

VR: Much more ordinary. We cannot rely only on the sudden experience of prajna, because we haven't stabilized it.

S: So without the foundation, that has the potential to turn into sheer terror.

VR: Generally, it would, I think. In fact, many theistic paths promote the notion of some sort of quick zap. When people have not developed prajna, that approach can lead to insanity and other problems.

S: Thank you.

STUDENT: Good evening, Sir. You mentioned that shunyata should not be confused with alaya. The Vidyadhara talked about alaya as being unconditional and the same as basic goodness, and then somewhere else he said it's not quite unconditional. Could you say something about that, especially from the view of resting in the nature of alaya?

VR: Yes. Alaya is associated with kündzop and the emptiness of kündzop. Prajna sees the emptiness of the alaya, or the kündzop. So when you rest your mind in the nature of alaya, you're resting in the emptiness of the alaya. However, from the view of full-blown, absolute shunyata, the alaya is still conditional. From the view of prajna, we look at alaya in two ways, and one view is that the alaya is tainted.

STUDENT: You said that when wakefulness takes over, then we become clear about what should be accepted and what should be rejected, and you associated that with discriminating awareness. My

understanding from the slogans—I don't recall which one in particular—is that in the mahayana everything is brought to the path. I'm curious about what might be rejected.

VR: In terms of one's practice, it is not good, let's say, to meditate out in the bright sun. It would probably hurt your practice. In terms of one's everyday life, it would not be good to steal from other people, because it would probably make you feel deceptive and not able to practice paramita. In terms of food, it's not good to eat a whole watermelon, and so on.

S: Aren't all of those things covered by discipline—some quality of dignified or right activity?

VR: Yes, that's discipline, but there are also generosity, patience, and the rest of the paramitas. In terms of the inner practice of what should be adopted and what should be abandoned, the quality of practice that involves congratulating yourself should not be adopted. The quality of clinging to experience should not be adopted. The quality of mistaking shunyata for something else should not be adopted.

S: So in that sense, what is the meaning of bringing everything to the path?

VR: I think the slogan you are talking about is “When the world is filled with evil, transform all mishaps into the path of bodhi,” which is the mahayana view that everything is workable, so therefore one should

not reject anything. How prajna sees accepting and rejecting has to do with the practice of the path, rather than simply having an all-encompassing view. In other words, when you get down to the actual application, the practice, it's good to know that you cannot eat rocks, and so on. And it's supremely good to know that shunyata is not a thing. Therefore, you never get fixated on your experience in meditation, thinking, "Ah, that's it!"

STUDENT: Sir, thinking in terms of the *skandhas*, is it consciousness that experiences the gap?

VR: No, because consciousness is just one aspect of either side of that gap. It is awareness charged with prajna that experiences the gap.

S: Thank you.

STUDENT: You spoke about stabilization of wakefulness, and about dissolving 360-degree awareness.

VR: No; 360-degree awareness is the vipashyana experience.

S: And beyond vipashyana?

VR: The boundaries of awareness begin to dissolve. Then you experience nothing whatsoever. The stabilization of wakefulness in this case means that we actually build. If you don't have shamatha experience, you can't have vipashyana experience. If you don't have vipashyana experience, then you don't have shunyata experience.

S: So then at this point, more meditation, more building—

VR: More prajna. In the practice. We have to make another leap.

STUDENT: Sir, several times you said that opportunities and possibilities come with shunyata, with that little gap. If I understood correctly, you were saying that they were opportunities and possibilities of realizing no big deal, and that there's nothing to do.

VR: That's correct.

S: Are there any other opportunities and possibilities?

VR: No.

S: I didn't think so. Truly, no big deal.

VR: Truly.

S: You said that discriminating awareness was a bogus term, and I wonder why.

VR: In terms of language, it seems to set up duality. In fact, in *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, Gampopa says that Jetsün Milarepa said, “Whoever coined the phrase ‘discriminating awareness’ was a numbskull.” Somehow that phrase doesn't get to the heart of the experience, the cutting. It sounds much too abstract but, for the sake of language, we use that term. Sometimes we say “discriminating awareness wisdom.” But when we're talking in terms of path, we say prajna.

S: Thank you.

STUDENT: Sir, sometimes it seems that prajna, or some kind of discriminating awareness, fuels our lack of maitri. In a way it seems to be fuel for beating ourselves up. Could you say something about that?

VR: You see, if you have good vipashyana experience, then when the sword gets dull you can sharpen it. When prajna becomes dull, the result is the lack of maitri and a kind of false cutting, which is not real cutting. It's trying to cut the ego while leaving some part of it still breathing. There are a lot of warnings about that. As a bodhisattva, one should not go around saying, "I'm going to cut this and that." You can always tell when the sword is dull because you start to feel heavy and unfriendly to yourself.

S: Is there anything in particular that one should do to work with that?

VR: Yes; go back. Always go back and refresh yourself with shamatha-vipashyana practice, constantly.

S: Thank you.

VR: One can also practice the confession liturgies, and so on. Those are very good to do, but the basic thing is just to settle down, all over again.

STUDENT: Sir, you seem to be talking about some modification to the way we have been practicing shamatha-vipashyana practice in order to develop prajna. Is that correct?

VR: No.

S: Well, then is it something we have been experiencing all along?

VR: You tell me.

S: I guess I would say yes.

VR: So that's it.

S: So it's just more of the same?

VR: More, but with a wide-open attitude, open mind. With generosity, with discipline, with patience, exertion, and meditation.

S: Thank you.

STUDENT: Sir, could you talk more about the relationship between fear and forgetfulness?

VR: Fear, for us practitioners, could come as a sudden wave or could build up through emotional activity in the mind. In either case, we become afraid due to our mistaken perception of this emotional activity. We are afraid of what it will do to us, afraid that we will be corrupted or soiled or something like that.

S: Especially in interactions with other people—mostly my family and people who really bring up my neurotic tendencies—in certain

situations I think I'm seeing clearly. But at the point where I want to give them feedback or try and work with it, there's a sense of hesitation, and that's when I feel the fear.

VR: That's great, that's really good, that sense of hesitation. We want to do things properly, so we want to rely on the paramita practice, we want to be genuine about what we do. That's the last thought we have, and then there's a gap, and there's hesitation about whether or not we remember. Do we know how to do this? Fundamentally, we don't know how to do it. But in that gap we give birth to experience which has no reference point, and therefore we can do it. Therefore memory is clear.

S: So there's a lack of confidence to do it in the right way.

VR: That's because of forgetfulness.

S: But then you're left in a situation of not knowing what to say or do.

VR: That's where prajna comes in. At that moment when you are left without ground and without anything coming up, look at that, penetrate into that.

S: I'll work on that, thanks.

STUDENT: Hello, Sir. I wonder about this difference between self and other. You said the sword of prajna cuts both ways, and one side is ego fixation and grasping.

VR: Grasping is the ego fixation of self; and the ego fixation of other is the belief that there are existent things, even if the self doesn't exist. In other words, you can think that your perceptions are vividly real and not experience a self.

S: Yes, but if you go further and somehow empty that out, then what is the other?

VR: There isn't any.

S: Okay. Thank you.

STUDENT: Sir, in response to an earlier question you said that awareness charged with prajna experiences the gap. We come to the path, we practice shamatha-vipashyana, we experience the gap. My question is who is it that practices and experiences all of this?

VR: Indeed, who is it? Well, again, this is where prajna comes in handy! Does this *who* have a shape? Does it have a color? Can you discern a *who* anywhere that you can identify as *who*?

S: No. But there is a sense of awareness through all of this, some sense of consciousness that is in pain, that is suffering, that is confused, that is experiencing the gap. My question is, if not *who*, what?

VR: That's the second ego, the *what*. *Who* is the first ego, and *what* is the second one.

S: I'm getting caught up in words here; forgetting about *who* and *what*—

VR: No; this is good! We're not caught up in anything.

S: I've tried to think of another word except *who* or *what*.

VR: Go ahead.

S: Well, again, there's some sense of awareness that's on the path.

VR: That's right. You said there's the awareness suffers, something like that.

S: There's the awareness that's conducting this conversation.

VR: Really?

S: If not “*What* is that?” and if not “*Who* is not that?” then what do you have to say about it?

VR: Well, the only thing I have to say about it is *what*?

S: Well, I had the sense that maybe it's *tathagatagarbha*, buddha nature. But I don't imagine that buddha nature would experience difficulties. There is some sense of an experiencer that is experiencing difficulties.

VR: Are you sure?

S: It seems that something is going on.

VR: Seems to you?

S: See, that's another thing I'm getting confused about—I'm confused about the use of *I* or *me* in different ways.

VR: Let's not think about this in terms of words. Let's think about it in terms of experience—*who* as an experience, *what* as an experience. Let's think of it that way. Who's *who* and what's *what* in terms of experience?

S: That's my question: who's who and what's what in terms of experience? What is this experience that is going on?

VR: What is it, indeed? Seems to be very *what*.

S: Well, I suppose I should say thank you!

STUDENT: Sir, the Loppön spoke about inverted kündzop and purified kündzop, and you described kündzop as filling in the gaps. Does purified kündzop do that as well?

VR: Yes.

S: But it seems that purified kündzop would be free of the notion of self and other.

VR: Filling in the gaps from the purified view is the display of appearance, of all phenomena [pointing to flower arrangement], which has no particular allegiance to ego or to egolessness.

S: And döndam is empty of other.

VR: It's empty of *this* [again pointing to flower arrangement].

S: I see.

VR: Or *that*, whatever you call it.

S: I was wondering why it's not said that purified kündzop is also empty of other.

VR: Kündzop is other, which is empty in itself. These flowers, for instance. If you begin to take them apart, the flower arrangement will disappear, and if you begin to take apart the flower, the flower will disappear. It has no self-nature except that it appears this way, as a flower arrangement, which is kündzop.

S: But in purified kündzop, which is free of concepts, those flowers have already been taken apart.

VR: Nevertheless, there they are. The concept, the impure kündzop, is neurotic attachment to this appearance.

S: Believing in that as solid.

VR: "I love my flower arrangement."

S: So when the flower arrangement is not seen as solid, it seems that it has already been taken apart, even at the level of kündzop.

VR: That's why we say it is empty of any self-nature, because as it manifests, it's already taken apart. Döndam doesn't arise—as a flower arrangement, or as anything.

STUDENT: Sir, I have a question about ignorance. I think you said that the gap is the ignorant state and it causes fear, and from ego's view

the worst thing is ignorance. I used to think that the very nature of ignorance is that you don't notice it, which is what makes it so idiotic or so thick. The Vidyadhara said that ignorance, passion, and aggression need to be cut through. When I become conscious of how thick the ignorance is, it does not at all feel like your description of shunyata. Is there another ignorance you were talking about? Or is it the same ignorance?

VR: The same as what?

S: The gap? Shunyata?

VR: Ordinarily, when we don't have anything happening, we can't generate an answer to our question. We are frightened because we think we are ignorant, or in an ignorant state, which is the birth of ego. Ignorance arises first, then passion and aggression. From the view of prajna, when this so-called ignorance arises, we cut through the very root of it by not doing anything at all, by just seeing it as it is.

S: Is that the only effort involved?

VR: Yes.

S: What kind of effort is it?

VR: Unconditional effort.

S: There is no further effort?

VR: No. If there is, then you are trying to put clothes on nothing.

Let's say, for the sake of discussion, that the mind is a mirror. When the mind begins to see itself, see its reflection clearly—that is, it sees both the ignorant state and the awakened state—then discriminating awareness begins to activate itself in the mind, and that is prajna. Once you catch on to that, then you engage that process every time you sit and meditate.

S: Thank you very much, sir.

VR: You're welcome.

STUDENT: Sir, you talked about how compassion was necessary in order to allow for the experience of shunyata. I'm confused because it seems that our awareness of bodhichitta and the further development of *karuna* come out of the experience of shunyata.

VR: Yes; it works both ways.

S: Okay. Thank you.

STUDENT: Sir. I've been experiencing, particularly during the mahayana period, a lot of panic and doubt about whether or not I can do this path, whether or not I'm really willing to do it. I felt choiceless when I got here, and yet I find myself feeling that this is not going to work for me. A lot of fear comes up around that because I see that I don't have many other choices out there. When that fear comes up, I see through it. It doesn't seem to last very long, but it still comes up every day. My guess is that my ego is freaked out because being kind to

myself, maitri, has always been the toughest thing for me. I usually feed on the opposite of that. Also, what worries me is that I feel almost an aversion to your presence, which I don't like feeling, and yet maybe that's because I know it's the scariest place to be. I don't know, I'm confused.

VR: Oh, no, you're not. It sounds pretty straightforward.

S: I've always felt fairly sure about this path, and before I came here I felt my meditation practice was really opening and giving me some experience that I haven't found anywhere else. The best description of how the fear comes up for me is that I am too lost to do this so I'm going to stay lost. I don't think that's really true, but it's there every day, and I feel like it shouldn't be there now.

VR: Well, there we have a problem. The basic problem happens when we get to a certain point in our practice and we feel that irritation or neurosis shouldn't be there anymore. That is precisely when we have to jump on it. We actually have to jump on it with prajna, which is not aggressive but which cuts indulgence in any attitude, including that one. You just do it. Don't worry about the fact that it'll be there the next day or the next day, or the next day. The bodhisattva's attitude is very kind, from the perspective of, "This could last forever."

S: I can see through it. What freaks me out is that it keeps coming back; but you're telling me that's no big deal?

VR: Not really, as long as you have the attitude of going forward. That's really what is important here. If you can go forward, that will fall away. Going backwards, or sidetracking, is indulging oneself in the feeling of inadequacy or anything else you're working on, any wrinkle in your ego. What we don't want to face is nothing whatsoever, that maybe we don't exist. And maybe this doesn't exist, or maybe it does. We don't want to face that, either *kündzop* or *döndam*.

In this case we have to be straightforward about practice. The practice requires effort, but not effort based on thinking, "If I do it tomorrow, I'll get rid of it by the next day." That won't work. Basically, you're getting into the juicy part, and you can't back up. This is what the warrior's path is all about. It's not a big deal, and yet it seems to be what it's all about. When you experience fear and it doesn't last very long, where does it go?

S: It seems so real, and then it's gone.

VR: What was the *it* that seemed so real? That's what you have to get at. When you're experiencing an emotion, a *klesha*, in the midst of that emotion, exercise *prajna*. Right in the midst of it, look at the heart of it. What is this fear, what is this anger, what is the hatred, what is the jealousy, the pride? What is this? This approach is not simply an intellectual one which asks, "Does it have a shape, does it have a color, can I smell it, can I touch it?" *Prajna* is non-verbal in that you look directly into the heart of whatever arises and see if there is any

substance. And you keep doing that, because you are kind. When you're unkind, then you stop doing that.

S: Thank you, sir.

VR: Good luck! Keep going.

STUDENT: Sir, you talked about emptiness externally, and I seem to be able to relate to that. But when you talk about it internally in terms of emotions, it gets trickier. It seems that the concept of emptiness becomes a defense in some way, particularly if I'm emotionally interacting with another person. There's a sense of emptiness, and so I can say, "Oh, well, it's just empty," so I don't extend myself.

VR: That's precisely why you need the weapon of prajna—which you already have, by the way.

S: You recognize the emptiness, or that you've solidified that as a concept at that point, and there needs to be a going out, or the weapon?

VR: You have to be willing to use it to cut *this* and to cut *that*.

S: Sometimes I'm not sure how to do that.

VR: You will find out. I can't tell you. You already know. Sometimes you can, and sometimes you can't. Therefore, it's good to practice.

S: Thank you, sir.

VR: You're welcome.

STUDENT: Sir, the description of shunyata was very encouraging because the simple gaps seem to occur constantly. Is the experience of shunyata singular, or multiple and ongoing? And in relation to that, is it the experience of shunyata that makes prajna full blown, or is prajna already full blown in order to see the gap as shunyata?

VR: Well, from an absolute view, prajna is already full blown. From a relative view, it arises in stages. You could say that there is a glimpse of shunyata which encourages further prajna, and when you really click into the prajna, that prajna sees shunyata. So in one moment everything is clear.

S: So that at one point the prajna becomes unwavering? After some initial glimpse, is it something that is ongoing—multiple, further bottoms falling out of the bucket?

VR: I wouldn't worry about it until you experience it.

S: Thank you.

STUDENT: Sir, the gap. How frequently does it occur?

VR: The gap doesn't occur.

S: Well, you described the gap as when the past is running out and the future hasn't happened yet. It seems that could happen in seconds, milliseconds, microseconds—

VR: No.

S: No. Longer than that?

VR: It doesn't occur as experience. You can't see it. You can't remember it from an ego point of view.

S: So is the fear that comes in due to ego the all-pervasive anxiety I've been feeling all these years?

VR: That's what we say.

S: It's a true experience. It is! Trust me.

VR: Is it?

S: Yes.

VR: Ah!

S: So that is the experience that can be cut by prajna?

VR: What can be cut is the attachment or attention to such an experience, which is the ego part. The anxiety itself is just energy.

S: There is an awareness of that gap, though, is that correct?

VR: It appears that there is an awareness.

S: And you can consciously go into that gap with prajna?

VR: Yes. Correct.

S: Thank you.

VR: You're welcome.

STUDENT: Sir, a couple of days ago Karl Springer talked about how bodhisattva activity might be directed toward the process of dying, drug addiction, and prisons. On the one hand, it seemed that there is a lot of suffering in those three things and, on the other, a lot of denial about suffering. I was wondering if the tension between those two...

VR: That's it. That's it. You got it.

S: Then from the dharmic view, when one is working with people who are experiencing that tension, what is it about that tension that makes it more workable?

VR: The experience of shunyata. In fact, that's the only thing that makes it possible to work in that way. The tension itself is insubstantial. There's no ego in it.

S: From their point of view, they—

VR: Who are they?

S: The person who is dying or...

VR: How would you know what their point of view is?

S: I guess you'd have to look at your own.

VR: Then it's like a mirror again. You're trying to see your own point of view, and that doesn't exist either. You have to really be courageous in order to help people; you can't help them through your projections.

S: Thank you.

STUDENT: Sir, with regard to the earlier question on emptiness, I've been wondering about the vows that we take, whether Buddhist vows or, let's say, marriage vows. Are they regarded as empty, too?

VR: Yes, indeed, they are.

S: Then what prevents one from just abandoning the whole project?

VR: Nothing.

S: Is working with the vow, holding to the vow, in some way maintaining an ego?

VR: If there's ego in generosity, if there's ego in discipline, if there's ego in patience, then there is ego. If there is not, then following that practice and that vow is good.

S: I see. Thank you.

STUDENT: Sir. Could you say something about holding attention to prajna or relating with prajna after you've seen it, because over time the veil of ignorance or emotionality starts cranking up? Could you say something about allegiance to prajna?

VR: The experience of prajna is like an edge—or, more likely, the prajna is like an edge of experience. When you have experience, duality arises in the form of the experiencer and what is experienced. Prajna is like the edge that cuts through all of that. When prajna arises, you begin to see the emptiness of the duality of your perception and what

you perceive. Then you start to become accustomed to that. However, the fact that as you practice things get covered over is the further birth of prajna. Then you have the opportunity to exercise your particular weapon. Prajna becomes continuous practice, because when you look at the nature of samsara or confused existence, it is constantly being covered over. At the same time, prajna is constantly cutting. Is there relief from suffering in that? Yes; that is the actual relief from suffering. You begin to see that this particular sword is self-existing and continuous. You don't have to reinvent the wheel. Sometimes, if you become lazy and forgetful, it's necessary to sharpen it, but that's easy to do; you just let go and expand your mind.

S: So there's some trust that it will return?

VR: Yes. That's basically what we come down to; the basic point is trust. We come right down to the fact that you must trust your own intelligence. There's no buddha, no one else who is going to do it for you.

S: Thank you.

VR: You're welcome.

Perhaps we should stop at this point. I would like to request you to take to heart this particular path and in particular this prajna, which can cut the fantasy of meditation. If this sounds hard, don't be afraid, because that fantasy is transparent and has no real existence. When you

practice during the sitting period, keep that in mind. You should be willing to use your intelligence to cut any fixation that arises, such as “I am meditating.”

We are not talking about wallowing in some pretense of emptiness, nor about clinging to emptiness as a self-congratulatory process of you, the meditator. We are talking about cutting ego fixation and grasping altogether. You cannot do that by being aggressive, but you can use all the qualities of paramita practice in your sitting practice. Being generous means not being upset with yourself if you feel things are not going properly. Being disciplined is not indulging yourself in laziness in your attitude about practice. Being patient means that when you experience emptiness and then discursiveness arises, let it go. Having exertion means not thinking that the energy needed to practice comes from somewhere. And to meditate means just to rest in the natural state of your own mind. You can do this. It's very simple. Just be steady, and take the opportunity to be willing to cut your own trip.

This is our transition to the vajrayana, and if we are going to get the essence of it and genuinely experience the vajrayana teachings, which are the final teachings of this particular seminary and also the final teachings of the three turnings of the wheel of the dharma, it is necessary for you to make that effort to cut your own bias, especially in terms of your experience. I don't want to give you the impression that I want you to be uptight. Tight, yes; but, at the same time, don't make

unnecessary strokes with this particular sword. Don't flail about thinking you're cutting something that doesn't exist.

This seminary has been excellent so far. I think everyone is doing just fine. We should do our best to keep it that way. Let's not lose our discipline. However, any craziness that arises should be that direct craziness which makes everything enlightened. So, *maha* enjoyment. Good.

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