

## REMEMBERING WHO WE ARE

In practicing the hinayana discipline, we have been careful and precise, working hard to recover from the illness of confused ideas. All of that good discipline has prepared us to take one bold, strong step. That step is proclaiming that in each of us, there is a spark of wisdom which is absolutely uncontrollable. Talking about this spark of wisdom is a very delicate matter and potentially explosive. Nevertheless, at some point it is necessary to proclaim our own quality of wakefulness, which is called buddha nature.

As we practice meditation and develop mindfulness and awareness, there is a tendency to become insular, to create a subtle kind of fortification. As we file down the coarseness caused by passion, aggression, and ignorance, we begin to experience freedom from suffering. But our confidence is still in its infancy, and we fear we might regress to samsaric behavior. At that point, we might attempt to make our practice into a safeguard against the suffering of confusion. But not wanting to experience pain becomes a problem, because it is a gesture of defense rather than of liberation.

When we leave the environment of sitting practice and venture out, we encounter the world of confusion, which is harsh and unpredictable. The postmeditation experience is not quite as refined as we expected. We wonder whether we should take a chance on relating to all of it again. Will we lose our sense of peacefulness and clarity?

At some point we realize that our experience of mindfulness and awareness has no ground in itself. Because there is no confirmation of our existence, we feel naked. We find that Buddhism is not supporting us; there is no floor underneath at all. Then we become frightened and shocked. We realize that nothing, including our practice, can save us. We might even have second thoughts about our commitment to this path.

This is an extremely important point in our journey. We are about to make a transition into the mahayana, the great vehicle, the open way. This experience of vulnerability, which quivers and is not quite sure, is the stepping stone to the mahayana path. If we do not take that step, our practice could become solidified, like a monument that has no life of its own. Our practice has to expand to include the reality of postmeditation, which includes the reality of relationships. We realize that we can afford to be slightly more adventurous. We can afford to accommodate the noise, the din, the color, and the chaos.

Once we feel we have accomplished our discipline, we would like to protect it. The mahayana provides the means to protect it properly. The mahayana path is like the ultimate vaccine. This vaccine, which is made of illness itself, has to be reinjected into our system. This happens when we realize we cannot exclude the nonspiritual from our life. We cannot exclude the nonmindful and the nonaware. We have to accept negativity as part of our path.

In order to do that, we have to make friends with ourselves completely, by developing what is known as *maitri*, or loving kindness, kindness to ourselves. Kindness to ourselves means kindness to whatever negativity arises and to whatever seems to be outside our discipline. We have to learn to relax and readmit chaos, which means having an open heart. This open heart is like a wound: it is tender, throbbing, and alive. It brings the delightful discovery that fundamentally we are really quite soft. But when we look around, we see the whole world is struggling with that vulnerability and tenderness, trying to build steel, concrete, and glass over the soft earth. So the mahayana path begins with *maitri*, the kindness that waters the soft earth so the seed of buddha nature can grow.

The teachings of the mahayana proclaim that all beings possess an intrinsic and undeniable wakefulness, which is called *buddha nature*. In Sanskrit, it is known as *tathagatagarbha*, the seed of the

enlightened ones. *Tathagata* means *enlightened one*, and *garbha* means *seed* or *womb*. This fundamental, intrinsic wakefulness in us is both the starting point and the fulfillment of our human life. It is the cause of trying to achieve something and the achievement itself.

All of us would like to live a full and complete life and accomplish something meaningful. In that way we are different from the beings in other realms, such as animals, gods, or hungry ghosts, who do not share this uniquely human aspiration. Nevertheless, when we are born, we are born into confusion. Human existence is full of pain and discomfort, anxiety and expectation. Although our life is based on pure buddha nature, it is clouded by uncertainty.

The shock of birth makes us bewildered. Because we have no recollection of being born, we are constantly trying to remember who we are. We lose the clarity of intrinsic wakefulness, and we think, “Who am I?” Then we think, “If I am so and so, then how should I behave? How can I fulfill my life?” We are not sure, and because of that we try to create a way to be sure. We rely on the words of our parents, our peers and school teachers, our friends and relatives, our governments, and our books, in our attempt to remember who we are. We pursue diverse paths—spiritual, psychological, and material. But even our most wonderful thoughts and our greatest aspirations are linked to uncertainty about who we are.

Our efforts to remember can either breed further confusion or lead us to the genuine path. According to the mahayana teachings, tathagatagarbha is the seed of truly remembering who we are. It is the womb which gives birth to the tathagata, the fully awakened one. Tathagatagarbha is primordial goodness, that is, self-existing goodness without a reference point, good without contrast to bad. The potential to become buddha is already contained within us. When we realize our potential to become buddha, we start to recall our actual birth—not the physical birth of so and so, but our primordially good being. The clouds of uncertainty begin to disperse, and we discover a state of complete openness, which is vast and deep, free from concept, free from any reference point whatsoever.

The discovery of buddha nature leads to the development of compassion. Compassion is the natural expression of self-existing goodness. It is the basic instinct to care for others that exists in all beings. When we were born, someone nursed us so that our little body would survive. That was our mother. Without her, we would not be alive. Everyone has had someone who took care of him when he could not care for himself. Even the most vicious animals care for their young; the most hardened criminal has the capacity to love something or someone.

When we consider that fact, we cannot help but realize the basic tenderness and gentleness of our nature. We realize that we can be kind to ourselves, and furthermore we can radiate that kindness to others. The generation of compassion creates a river of kindness. That kindness continually benefits countless numbers of sentient beings and yet leaves no trace of its owner or bearer. In our lifetime, with great effort and true insight, we can give birth to compassion.