



WISDOM ACADEMY

Emptiness: A Practical Course for Meditators

LESSON 8 READING:
Introduction, Chapters 17 – 21

PART III:
AWARENESS

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17. THE NATURE OF AWARENESS

That everything is included within your mind is the essence of mind. To experience this is to have religious feeling.

—Suzuki Roshi¹

WHEN WE BEGIN training ourselves to pay attention, the emphasis—in this book and in meditation instructions generally—is on being mindful of all appearances: breath, body, sounds, thoughts, emotions, feeling tone, intention, craving, clinging, and so on. We develop a familiarity with all the elements of our experience in order to understand their empty nature and to develop greater ease in relating with them. This proves to be enormously helpful in reducing the suffering in life and coming to greater happiness.

After achieving a certain degree of skill working with phenomena, people often have a question that points their meditation in a different direction. The question can take different forms: Is this all there is? Why am I watching these things? What is the constant here? What is mindfulness really? This questioning usually arises unprompted and can feel both startling and urgent. Coaxed by the question, the meditator may get a sense of a different approach, or a teacher might suggest a new direction. In either case, the meditator might discover another way to look at his or her experience. This new vision suggests that all the phenomena have been like beads on a string, each set right next to another,

arising and passing ceaselessly moment after moment, bead after bead after bead. Seeing this is engaging and freeing, but what are all these beads of momentary experience set on? What is the string? What holds them together?

Through this inquiry, the meditator might realize that it is *awareness* that is present moment after moment with each bead, as it appears. It is awareness that holds all the varied beads of experience. This awareness seems always to be there. Even its flavor seems consistent over time, especially when the afflictive emotions are not so active. What is this factor we're starting to call awareness? Is it truly ongoing? Can it become the next focus for our meditation? How would we do that? Is awareness empty too? These are the questions we'll explore in part 3, on awareness.

AWARENESS: THE FIELD OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Our first discovery of awareness in meditation can be quite exciting. We may have been observing objects for a long time but never quite noticed the observing faculty itself. Once we see it, it's hard to believe we missed it all this time. It now seems so obvious. D. H. Lawrence compared this to someone sitting by a fire outside at night and being so entranced by the things illuminated that they forget to notice the beauty and mystery of the firelight. Awareness is the light at the heart of sentient life.

Why have we not been meditating on awareness directly? Because awareness is subtle. It seems it is there all the time, so we can't mark it by its coming and going, as we would other subtle phenomena like calm or equanimity. We can keep asking, "Am I aware right now?" and the answer keeps coming back, "Yes." But it isn't easy to locate awareness. There is no Pali word that is typically translated as awareness, so we can't rely on the Buddha's direct teachings here. Still, *awareness* is an evocative word in English that different Buddhist schools have found to be a helpful pointer in both meditation and understanding. Awareness seems very close to consciousness (*viññāna*) in that it holds sense experience, but perhaps there is also mindfulness (*sati*) since it seems somewhat intelligent. As a way to explore awareness, we'll start by looking at its similarities with consciousness.

We've seen that the Pali term *viññāna* usually refers to one of six kinds of consciousness corresponding to the six senses: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, and so on. Consciousness in this usage means the *knowing* of an individual sense object: sight, sound, and so forth. If the sense organ is functioning, then in our immediate experience the consciousness of the object arises together with the object; the meeting of the three is contact. When the object ceases, the knowing of it also ceases. Consciousness in this usage is clearly an impermanent, conditioned phenomenon.

The English word *awareness* has a slightly different sense. It includes the knowing of sense objects, since they are what make up our experience, but in English the term isn't so tied to just one sense organ at a time. There is for some the intuition of a faculty that is more pervasive and perhaps more fundamental than sense consciousness. We might say that all the objects of sense consciousness are arising and passing within a broad field of knowing, the way individual clouds come and go in a blue sky. The Buddha didn't explicitly describe such a dimension, so perhaps we are overinterpreting here, but some of the Pali Discourses do seem to hint at such a thing. At any rate, let us use as a working definition of awareness "the broad field or space of consciousness within which individual objects are known." This provides, we might say, an alternate vantage point for looking at our experience. The meditation at the end of this chapter offers an experiential way to connect to this sense of awareness.

Awareness is present at any point in the broad field to which you direct your attention. It does not seem to be entirely dependent on the presence of an object. This reminds us of the Buddha's advice for abiding in emptiness: give no attention to signs. Without fixating on any of the signs, can we sense the awareness clearly enough that we can pay attention to that? Then we are not sending the mind out toward anything but are abiding in that "inward-staying, unentangled knowing" that Upasika Kee spoke about. By shifting our attention from a sense object to the knowing of it, we are taking a step back. We are not attached to or entangled in the object, but we are still aware of it. We are neither cut off nor disconnected.

All objects of the phenomenal world appear and disappear in the big empty space of awareness or, we could say, in the empty space of mind—what Suzuki

Roshi called “big mind.”² When we see in this way, there is a greater sense of spaciousness and ease because we are not fixated on or grasping after objects. But there is still a focus for attention, a thing to come back to again and again, which is the awareness itself. So we can also call this practice the awareness of awareness. It is subtle; awareness is not quite locatable. It is not an object that can be taken hold of; awareness is what holds objects. Your right hand can hold a stick, but it can’t hold itself. As Wei Wu Wei put it, “What we are looking for is what is looking.”³

Ajahn Sumedho likened it to our eyes:

Just like the question “Can you see your own eyes?” Nobody can see their own eyes. I can see your eyes but I can’t see my eyes. I’m sitting right here, I’ve got two eyes and I can’t see them. But you can see my eyes. Looking in a mirror I can see a reflection, but that’s not my eyes, it’s a reflection of my eyes. But there’s no need for me to see my eyes because I can see! It’s ridiculous, isn’t it? If I started saying “Why can’t I see my own eyes?” you’d think “Ajahn Sumedho’s really weird, isn’t he!”⁴

Awareness can’t be grasped, but we know it’s there. As Ajahn Chah said, “You’re riding on a horse and asking, ‘Where’s the horse?’”⁵ Don’t search too hard. We know awareness by its functioning, its activity of revealing sense objects. If you lose touch with it, just ask, “Am I aware right now?” Then stay with whatever you notice about the awareness. Over time, as this practice becomes more familiar, it will be easier to notice awareness itself.

Awareness is not a thing that can be taken hold of—and we have to ask if it is in fact a *thing* at all. We might rather say that awareness is the *activity* of knowing what arises—not a noun but a verb. Awareness is the knowing. It is a functioning: a revealing, an illuminating of what appears. Awareness is *aware-ing*.

WHAT IS DOING THE KNOWING?

Joseph Goldstein sometimes gives meditation instruction in the passive voice. Instead of telling students to observe sensations in the body, he phrases it

“Sensations are being known.” This helps reduce the sense of a separate observer, usually imagined to be in the head looking down at the rest of the body. When following an instruction given in the passive voice, we are more likely to have a direct experience of sensations being where they are, with no separate watcher. This is like the Buddha’s instruction to Bāhiya from chapter 7, “In what is sensed, let there be just the sensed.”

We can apply this passive phrasing to many situations in life. If you rub your hand along your cheek, you might say, “The cheek is being rubbed.” If you strike a bell with a stick, you could say, “The bell is being struck.” If you cut a piece of paper with a pair of scissors, you could say, “The paper is being cut.” For each passive construction, something unspecified is performing the action. If you ask, “By what is this act being done?” the answers are simple. The cheek is rubbed by the hand. The bell is struck by the stick. The paper is cut by the scissors. In each case, there is an agent doing the act.

Now direct your attention to the body and notice, “Sensations are being known.” Spend a few moments in touch with this experience, retaining the passive voice. Then ask the question, “Known by what?” If sensations are being known, what is the agent doing the knowing?

Before answering, notice if there is a shift in the quality of your attention when you ask this. You’ve been paying attention to sensations in the body, and now you ask what it is they are known by. If there is a shift in your attention, does it lead to a shift in mood, thoughts, or perceptions? We’ll come back to this investigation a little later.

One possible response to the question “Known by what?” is to say that the sensations are being known *by awareness*. However, awareness doesn’t point to a thing, to an actor. Awareness is the *activity* of knowing, so as I’ve said awareness seems to be a verb. It is the act of knowing itself; awareness is not the agent carrying out the knowing.

If you don’t know the answer to these questions from direct experience, consider two possible responses. One is to say the question is not valid. There is no noun carrying out the action. Awareness is happening, knowing sensations is happening, but *there’s nothing else there*. No agent is behind the knowing. Perhaps knowing how this happens is not important to you. We’ve already spent some time looking at a version of this view: there is nothing beyond the five

aggregates except nibbāna, and in this view, nibbāna doesn't have any quality of knowing.

Another possible response is to admit that *known by what?* might be a valid question but you don't know the answer. This leaves you free to further investigate this question in the context of meditative practice.

In my experience, even the meditative asking of this question—irrespective of whether the question yields answers—often brings about some effect, like a widening of attention, a sense of spaciousness, a release from any present fixation, an inner stillness characterized by keen interest, or a highlighting of the mystery of awareness. A genuine inquiry with sincere interest has its own rewards. This inquiry can also lead us to further and deeper insight.

THAT WHICH KNOWS

We don't yet know what knows, so we'll continue our search. We human beings are made up of a body and a mind. The body is not doing the knowing; too many things are known that are not physical. So let's try the mind. What do we mean by mind? Our mental nature includes mental objects like thoughts and emotions, but those are things being known. They aren't doing the knowing. Perhaps another aspect of mental nature is doing the knowing. Let's review the Buddha's teachings to see how he described "mind" and if he ever used a word signifying "that which knows."

There are three Pali words that can be translated as "mind." The first and most common is *citta*, which might arguably be best translated as "psyche." In the Buddha's teaching on the four foundations of mindfulness, *citta* is the third. The Buddha instructs his disciples to contemplate the mind in the mind, or the mind as mind, observing dispassionately if there is lust, hatred, delusion, or their absences; if it is contracted or not, concentrated or not, and so on. Thus, he describes *citta* in terms of what influences or molds it: These traits are objects or attributes of mind. The way the Buddha uses the word *citta* throughout the discourses, it is a conventional designation, not a thing that fundamentally is. So *citta* cannot mean "that which knows."*

*The Abhidhamma uses the term *citta* differently. There it is viewed as an ultimate, but this Abhidhamma usage corresponds more to the way the term *viññāṇa* is used in the discourses as the fifth aggregate.

The second Pali term is *mano*. In the *Discourse on Totality*,⁶ *mano* is the word for mind in the sequence “eye and sights, ear and sounds, nose and smells, tongue and tastes, body and sensations, mind and mind objects.” *Mano* here designates the sixth internal sense base, the organ that takes in mental objects like thoughts and emotions, as the eye takes in sights. *Knowing* mental objects is *manoviññāna*, mind consciousness. Perhaps *mano* should be translated as “mind organ.” Since *mano* receives only mental objects, it is not qualified to be “that which knows” all categories of sense experience.

The third Pali term to consider is *viññāṇa*, or consciousness. This term usually denotes the six classes of mental faculty that cognize the six kinds of sense experience. In this way, sense consciousness is close to “that which knows.” But as with our word *awareness*, we have come to see the activity of knowing as a verb. Consciousness *is* the knowing, just as awareness is. They are exactly alike in this way. So consciousness is also a verb, in this sense. It therefore cannot be the noun doing the knowing, or “that which knows.”

None of these three terms—*citta*, *mano*, and *viññāṇa*—is quite what we’re looking for. We’ll have to keep looking. In many schools of Buddhism, the word used for this agent is “mind”: “Mind is that which knows.” Let’s provisionally adopt this and see where it takes us. We’re not the first to try to find it.

Bodhidharma was the Indian master who brought Buddhism to China in the fifth century C.E. He is revered as the First Ancestor of Chan Buddhism. Legend has it that Bodhidharma spent nine years in a cave, not speaking to anyone. Finally, a student named Huike so desperately wanted instruction that he cut off his left arm and tossed it into the cave to prove his sincerity, yelling:

Huike: “My mind is not at peace! I beg you, Master, pacify it!”

Bodhidharma: “Bring me your mind and I will pacify it.”

Huike: “I have searched for this mind but I have never been able to find it.”

Bodhidharma: “There, I have pacified your mind.”

With this, Huike is said to have awakened.⁷

Searching, with or without finding—the inquiry itself—can lead to great

insight. This was pointed to by Lama Shabkar, a great Tibetan practitioner of the eighteenth century.

Now come up close and listen. When you look carefully, you won't find the merest speck of real mind you can put your finger on and say, "This is it!" And not finding anything is an incredible find. Friends! To start with, mind doesn't emerge from anything. It's primordially empty; there's nothing there to hold on to. It isn't anywhere; it has no shape or color.⁸

Awareness is the broad field of knowing, and here *mind* is that which knows. The two are intimately related. Awareness occurs as the result of mind's functioning. Wherever mind is, awareness is there too. They are coterminous; they occupy the same territory. Awareness is the *activity* of knowing; mind is the *thing* that does the knowing. They are not synonymous but they share many attributes.

THE NATURE OF MIND

You can approach mind by looking at your *experience* of awareness. Does it have shape or color? Size? Boundary or limit? As you sit with the sense of awareness, is there anything *fixed* within it or is everything coming and going? We've explored this before and are pretty confident that the sense objects within awareness are impermanent—all are coming and going. The field of awareness does not have anything in it that is fixed, or stuck. There is no unchanging object there. Therefore, awareness is fundamentally empty, and it is this basic emptiness that creates the space for phenomena to arise and depart. And even as phenomena come and go, awareness is never completely filled up. There is always room for the next thing to arise. Awareness's emptiness allows all things to come into being.

If awareness is fundamentally empty, then so is mind. That which knows is even harder to discover than the knowing. We find nothing fixed in the things being known or in that which is knowing them. As they are coterminous, we can talk about the empty space of mind as well as the empty space of awareness.

To see the empty nature of mind is liberating. If nothing is there from the beginning, anything that has come in can be taken out. It's like a room full of

furniture. Originally the room is empty. The furniture is brought in piece by piece. The person living there knows that anything they brought into the room can also be taken out—chairs, beds, tables, and so on. Similarly anything brought into the mind by prior causes and conditions can be taken out—afflictive emotions, karmic patterns, all kinds of suffering. Nothing is stuck. This empty nature is the direct route to freedom. Once we know it, it is only a question of doing the work. As Suzuki Roshi put it, “People who know the state of emptiness will always be able to dissolve their problems by constancy.”⁹ Constancy here means continuing with our practice of right effort. Once we know the peace of an empty mind, we only need to keep letting go of the sources of suffering.

The field of awareness, like vast space, is intrinsically empty. The emptiness of space allows physical objects to arise within it. But unlike physical space, the field of awareness has another power. It is “intrinsically knowing.” Its basic activity is to know, to know things. Physical space accommodates objects, but it doesn’t know them. The space of awareness accommodates objects and knows them. Each phenomenon is known in awareness as soon as it arises. In fact, we can’t completely separate the object from the knowing of it. The object and the knowing arise as one experience with two aspects, like seeing the roundness and the yellowness of a gold coin. Awareness is always knowing; it cannot not know.

The Buddha pointed to the accommodating power of space in the advice he gave his son, Rahula, when the boy was about seven:

Rahula, develop meditation that is like space, for when you develop meditation that is like space, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as space is not established anywhere, so too, Rahula, develop meditation that is like space.¹⁰

In describing space as not established anywhere, the Buddha is pointing to its emptiness.

Awareness is empty, and mind is unfindable, but we cannot say that mind doesn’t exist. It functions unceasingly; its function is knowing. This capacity of knowing is native to us; it isn’t manufactured. The objects that mind reveals are shown as they are, subject to the limits of our senses. And awareness is like a clear mirror; when an object appears, it is reflected accurately.

THE UNION OF EMPTINESS AND COGNIZANCE

As we investigate the empty openness of awareness and its knowing activity, we see that the two aren't separate. Space allows things to arise, and as soon as they arise, they are known. It's almost as though the empty space of awareness does the knowing. Joseph Goldstein calls this "the cognizing power of emptiness."

We can say that this field of awareness is an indivisible unity of emptiness and knowing, or emptiness and cognizance. Because of its function of *illuminating* what arises, the "knowing quality" might also be called luminosity or radiance. This doesn't mean that if we close our eyes, we are going to see a bright light because we are aware, or that a bright light is the proof we are being *really* aware. Rather, it's that this intrinsic knowing is always present to shine a light on whatever arises. Because of it, we know the objects of our experience. Ajahn Buddhadasa said that we should call it "emptiness," but because of its *knowing* property we call it "mind."¹¹

Mind is the indivisible unity of emptiness and cognizance. It does not obstruct any arising, and it knows phenomena immediately with a mirrorlike accuracy. This describes not just your mind or my mind but the mind of all sentient beings. As we will see, this mind has breathtaking qualities.

MEDITATION

Big Sky Mind

We might ask how we can meditate from this vantage point and whether we can meditate directly on the faculty of awareness. To explore this, we can practice a meditation called Big Sky Mind.

- Sit still and let your eyes gently close. Begin by paying attention to all the sounds around you, noticing how the range of sounds evokes in you the sense of space. Let the attention become wide and open so that all the sounds are simply coming and going within the wide space of awareness, which is like a big empty sky.
- After a few minutes, extend your attention to include body sensations. Sensations throughout the body can be felt as glimmers in the darkness of the night sky, arising and changing in the open space of awareness.
- Next, include thoughts and images. Thoughts and images are like clouds drifting through the sky, all within the empty space of awareness.
- When all these appearances have been noticed within the space of awareness, direct your attention to the *knowing* itself, which extends throughout the whole wide, empty space. Awareness is like the sky. It's wide and empty. To see if it's like that, look directly at the nature of your own awareness.

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18. WOMB OF THE BUDDHAS

The Perfection of Wisdom is limitlessly open and inexhaustibly rich in its power to awaken, heal, liberate, and enlighten.

—*Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*¹

IN THE LAST chapter's meditation on Big Sky Mind, we began to use awareness itself as the focus for attention. Now that we have considered awareness more systematically, we understand mind to be the indivisible unity of emptiness and cognizance. The meditation at the end of this chapter offers an opportunity to begin to explore this for yourself.

RESPONSIVENESS

Meditators often report that seeing the union of emptiness and awareness brings presence, interest, ease, and a relaxation that comes from not being fixated on any of the things that are being known. There may be pain in the back or a few wandering thoughts, but these are simply passing clouds in the vast space of knowing. There is no need to grasp them, first because the objects are so clearly fleeting, and second because no grasping would change the basic space of awareness we are attending to. The lack of motivation to grasp, or even to crave, brings a sense of lightness and relief to the heart, and a sense of freedom opens up.

When the heart is freed from its burden of self-concern, many wonderful qualities can come forth.

The avenue to these beautiful qualities is seeing the unity of emptiness and cognizance. The arising of these qualities isn't random or accidental. They arise to the degree we see this unity. This capacity for wholesome qualities is another basic aspect of the nature of the mind. There is emptiness, there is awareness, and there is this manifestation of beautiful states through what we can call the mind's *responsiveness*. Responsiveness is an intrinsic part of the mind, but it cannot function freely when dense reactive formations like greed, hatred, and ignorance are present. When emptiness is seen thoroughly in a moment, that moment is empty of self, which means it is empty of grasping. Thus, seeing the unity of emptiness and cognizance means that the moment is free from grasping or fixation. That is when the beautiful qualities of mind can come forth.

In a continuation of the passage quoted in the last chapter, Lama Shabkar states, "Mind's nature is vivid as a flawless piece of crystal: intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, ceaselessly responsive."² Radiance here is a synonym for cognizance.

In Tibetan, the term for this responsive nature can be translated literally as "unobstructed compassionate activity." Whether it is the wisdom that frees us or the love that lets us care for others, this responsive quality of mind leads to healing, connection, and liberation, all aspects of compassionate activity. Seeing emptiness and cognizance opens the door to this responsiveness.

Some Mahayana teachers understand the quality of responsiveness in a more limited way, referring only to the ability of cognizance to respond by illuminating appearances. We will meet this kind of understanding again in a passage from the Pali Discourses a little later.

WOMB OF THE TATHĀGATAS

Now we see all three aspects of mind together—emptiness, radiance, and responsiveness. All are united and form the nature of this mind, "that which knows," fundamental and intrinsic to all sentient life. Together they provide the capabilities for a sentient being to become enlightened, or even to become a fully self-awakened buddha, as Siddhattha Gotama did. Because of their intrinsic power

to liberate, this union of emptiness, cognizance, and responsiveness is called in Sanskrit *tathāgata garbha*. *Tathāgata* is the term Gotama Buddha most often used when referring to himself. Some scholars say it means, literally, “one who has thus come,” or “one who has thus gone.” For our purposes, it can be said to be synonymous with the term *buddha*. The word *garbha* signifies womb or embryo. All buddhas, indeed all awakened beings, can be said to be born out of these three intrinsic facets of mind—emptiness, radiance, and responsiveness—that make up *tathāgata garbha*.

This beautiful phrase can be conveyed in English in a few ways. Literally we could call it “the womb of the tathāgatas” or “womb of the buddhas.” When the term was first translated into English, early in the twentieth century, it was rendered as “buddha nature.” It has also been described as the “nature of mind,” the most basic qualities of sentience present in all beings. We might also call it our “threefold nature.” I will use these terms synonymously.

These three aspects of the nature of mind are often explained in this way: The *essence* is emptiness, the *nature* is cognizance or radiance, and the *function* is responsiveness or compassionate activity.

Meditators are encouraged to *recognize* this empty, radiant, and responsive nature of mind in as many moments as possible. Recognition brings this fundamentally pure nature actively into the moment and over time establishes it as our normal way of being. As it becomes the norm, defilements and afflictive emotions are gradually weakened and eventually eliminated, leaving only the peace and wholesome qualities of our basic nature. This approach to practice does not involve wrestling with the defilements or countering them with antidotes so much as letting them evaporate in the radiance of emptiness, as clouds dissolve in the light of the sun. When one trusts that one’s fundamental nature is pure, one inclines toward nondoing, allowing this basic nature to effect the purification.

Other paths not based on this threefold nature, such as insight meditation on objects, reach a similar point when the qualities of mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom are strongly developed. Then the meditator simply trusts these wholesome qualities to continue to grow, and these qualities do the work of purification and liberation. Hence, the same flavors of trust and nondoing are found through insight meditation as well.

GOTAMA BUDDHA AND THE WOMB OF THE BUDDHAS

The concept of this threefold nature as the womb of the buddhas has had a powerful influence on practice and theory in many Buddhist schools for nearly two thousand years. The question naturally arises whether the Buddha himself taught this notion. A thorough review of the Pali Discourses shows that it seems not to have been explicitly taught by the Buddha. However, a careful and impartial reading reveals passages that point to this understanding. One famous passage discusses the radiance of the mind:

Luminous is this mind, O monks, but it is obscured by visiting defilements. An uninstructed ordinary person does not understand this as it really is, so for them there is no development of mind.

Luminous is this mind, O monks, and it is freed from visiting defilements. An instructed noble disciple understands this as it really is, so for them there is development of mind.³

The Pali term here for luminous is *pabhasarram*, which could also be translated as “radiant.” The passage does not say that radiance is an *intrinsic* factor of mind, and some commentators explain it as a conditioned state of concentration resulting in bright light. In either case the passage points to a connection between the purity of mind and a quality of brightness. Thus it aligns well with the understanding of the threefold nature of mind. It even suggests a direction for a meditation practice based on seeing the nature of a mind free from defilements.

In another discourse, the Buddha uses the same term to point to a more obviously transcendent way of seeing. A questioner asks the Buddha about the physical elements of the world, considered to be earth, water, fire, and air: “Where do the four material elements cease without remainder?”—inquiring about a spiritual understanding that goes beyond this world and its suffering.

The Buddha replies that this is the wrong question and begins by stating what the correct question is: “Where do earth, water, fire, and air find no footing? Where are name-and-form completely destroyed?” The Buddha is not so interested in escaping from the world of form, as the original question suggests, but

rather in finding a way to be free within it. It is our grasping that gives the elements their solidity or footing. How do we live within form so as not to grasp at it? We recall that name-and-form is a primary part of the psychological mechanism that leads to the sense of the duality of self and other. How can the sense of duality be overcome? The Buddha then replies to his own question:

Where consciousness is signless, boundless, luminous all around,
That is where earth, water, fire, and air find no footing,
There name-and-form are wholly destroyed.
With the cessation of consciousness, this is all destroyed.⁴

As an experiential pointer to the unconditioned, this is one of the deepest, most significant passages in all of the Pali Discourses. The term translated here as consciousness is *viññāṇa*, the term we've seen used for the six types of sense consciousness that know the six sense objects. When consciousness is described here as "signless, boundless, luminous," it is clear that *viññāṇa* is being used in a broader way. Now it refers to a kind of knowing that is not primarily concerned with knowing the sense objects. The material elements including the body are a key part of ordinary experience, but those elements find no footing in the consciousness described here. The whole apparatus of naming forms is undermined.

The emphasis in the Buddha's reply is on the qualities of consciousness itself, not the objects it reveals. Where consciousness is described as signless, it has no specific characteristics or marks. We cannot take a conceptual hold of something without a sign. This is a clear pointing to its emptiness, or lack of substance, the first aspect of the threefold nature of mind. The Buddha goes on to describe this consciousness as boundless, indicating that its nature is like space, without any form or edge. Both these descriptions align well with the way we have used awareness: the broad field of consciousness not limited to a single sense door. Finally, this consciousness is luminous all around, wherever we turn, illuminating all sense objects as they arise. There is not a single point in the whole space of awareness that isn't characterized by cognizance. So here in one brief line, the Buddha eloquently points to the same three aspects of the nature of mind that later schools elaborated: emptiness, cognizance, and responsiveness (in the more limited sense of illuminating what appears).

By describing consciousness in such experiential terms, the Buddha is essentially laying out a meditation practice and path. If we can realize, moment after moment, this signless, boundless, luminous consciousness, the elements will cease to find footing and duality will be seen through. The phrase in the final line, the “cessation of consciousness,” is shorthand for *nibbāna*. The word *consciousness* here refers to the six types of sense consciousness, which temporarily cease at the moment of enlightenment. Possibly some awareness continues even when sense consciousness stops, but any continuing awareness is likely to be signless, boundless, and luminous. So perhaps there is a direct link between the consciousness described in this passage, *nibbāna*, and *tathāgata garbha*. This linkage will be the theme of the next chapter.

THE PITFALLS OF LANGUAGE

There is a potential misunderstanding when *tathāgata garbha* is translated as “buddha nature.” The language suggests that everyone has a nature that is the same as the Buddha’s enlightened nature—that since we all have buddha nature, we are all buddhas. This is misleading. “Having buddha nature” is not the same as being a buddha. While a great Zen master like Dōgen might say that we are already enlightened because he truly sees the nonseparation of *samsara* and *nirvana*, for most of us a statement like this is a simplistic misrepresentation that confuses conventional and ultimate understanding. On the ultimate level, perhaps there is no distinction between buddhas and ordinary beings. All of us are formed of the five aggregates, for example. But on the conventional level, there are many valid distinctions. All share the union of emptiness and cognizance, but for some there is still suffering and for others there is not.

It’s sometimes said, “There is one nature but two paths.” One path leads to *nirvana*, the other remains in *samsara*. The key is whether one activates the implicit liberating qualities through seeing the nature of mind to be empty, aware, and responsive. One who sees this is said to *recognize* buddha nature and therefore might be on a path to becoming awakened. When one does not recognize one’s buddha nature and isn’t developing a path, one is therefore perpetuating greed, aversion, and delusion and ensuring continuation in *samsara*. It is not correct to speak from an ultimate point of view when one’s mind is not truly free of

distinctions—and one does not need to have in mind the concept of buddha nature in order to activate the path to buddhahood. Followers of other schools who understand emptiness, cognizance, and responsiveness are also activating this path.

There is the risk in even speaking “about buddha nature” that it comes to be taken as a “thing” that exists in the same way that sense objects, for instance, exist. Partly this may be an outcome of the way we have learned to relate to nouns in Western languages. The reification of buddha nature arises from misunderstanding its complete emptiness. It may be more helpful to consider it as a capacity within us that has great potential. *Garbha* can also mean “embryo,” so *tathāgata garbha* can point to the notion that the *potential* for awakening is in us without necessarily declaring that something exists like an intrinsic nature. Because the mind’s tendency to reify is strongly conditioned, as revealed by our persistent perceptions of permanence and self, it is helpful to reflect often on the complete emptiness of *tathāgata garbha*—even as we continue to use the term.

Another misunderstanding that arises around the concept of buddha nature concerns the nature of compassion. Some claim that since compassion is an intrinsic part of responsiveness, compassion is permanent. Responsiveness, however, hinges on the recognition of empty knowing. Without the recognition of emptiness and awareness, the beautiful qualities, including compassion, do not manifest. In addition, responsiveness points to the potential for many wholesome qualities to arise, not just compassion. These include love, wisdom, joy, equanimity, and gratitude. A beautiful quality arises *in response* to current experience. Around someone who is suffering, compassion is the natural response. Around someone who is truly happy, appreciative joy is the natural response. There isn’t one specific quality that is fixed in the heart.

MEDITATION

The Unity of Emptiness and Cognizance

- Sit quietly. Your eyes can be open or closed, as you like. Begin by paying attention to the space that surrounds you. If your eyes are open, let the visual field provide a sense of the broad space of awareness in all directions. If your eyes are closed, let the presence of sounds lead to that perception of space. If there are no sounds, notice the extent of the silence. Sit for a minute just noticing the sense of vast space that extends around you in all directions.
- Now ask, *Am I aware right now?* It should be easy to say yes. Sit and feel the awareness.
- Now ask, *Is awareness everywhere within this big space?* Don't think about an answer; just feel the extent of the awareness you are in touch with. Does awareness reveal appearances throughout the space wherever they arise? Even if nothing is appearing in some parts of the space, is awareness present to notice that? Is there any area in this space that is blocked off to awareness? Is there any point that awareness can't touch? Stay with this until you feel that awareness pervades the whole space.
- Now ask, *Can the space actually be separated from the awareness? Or, Can space and awareness be seen as a unity?* The space is empty. The awareness is knowing. Are they in any way separate? Can I see the two together? This is the unity of emptiness and cognizance. Stay with this sense.
- Now ask, *Can I see this union at one glance? Can I look for a moment and see emptiness and awareness together?* This is the purpose of this meditation. If you are not able to see the two joined with one glance, go back to the reflections above and rediscover this sense of unity. Then look again with a glance to see the union.
- Now notice how it feels to see in this way. There's emptiness and

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there's knowing, together. What is this experience like? If an emotion comes—whether frustration, confusion, or pride—just allow it to come without fixating on it or trying to change it. Then it will also go. Return to seeing the union of emptiness and awareness. Notice again how it feels. You can repeat this process for as long as you like.

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19. SUNLIGHT IN EMPTY SPACE

The field of boundless emptiness is what exists from the very beginning. The deep source, transparent down to the bottom, can radiantly shine and can respond unencumbered to each speck of dust without becoming its partner.

—Zen Master Hongzhi¹

WHEN IT IS said that buddha nature is an intrinsic part of sentient beings, the implication is that it is there from the beginning and present in every moment. It is not subject to arising and passing and is not considered to be an ordinary conditioned thing. It is taken to be fundamental in a way that sense objects are not; they come and go and are known to this nature. They may obscure it but they do not alter it. In this way, the nature of the mind is something like the *ground* for a sentient being, in relation to which all other things take their places. Circumstances come and go according to their own conditioned nature; the ground endures. Turning our attention toward this intrinsic nature can become the path.

This sounds very much like the way nibbāna is described in the Pali Discourses—as “everlasting”;² “no coming, no going, no staying, no ceasing, no arising”;³ the “ground” of the eightfold path;⁴ “unaging”;⁵ “deathless”;⁶ and “unconditioned.”⁷ At one point, Sāriputta urges Anuruddha in meditation, “Turn your attention to the Deathless.”⁸

In all the Pali Discourses, only nibbāna is described in these terms. Can we take buddha nature as a synonym for the deathless element, nibbāna? Is the union of emptiness and cognizance to be considered what is most fundamentally real?

Most Pali scholars wouldn't hesitate to consider emptiness a fundamental aspect of nibbāna. Ajahn Buddhadasa quotes a saying famous in Thailand, *Nibbānam paramam sunnam*, or "Nibbāna is the supreme emptiness."⁹ A well-known Pali commentary states, "The attainment of fruition [nibbāna] is called emptiness. . . . Nibbāna is called emptiness because it is empty of lust, etc."¹⁰

There is, however, no such agreement on whether cognizance is an aspect of nibbāna. Orthodox Theravadins and strict followers of Nāgārjuna are adamant that it is not so. Their primary term for cognizance, *viññāṇa*, or consciousness, one of the five aggregates, is always considered to be conditioned and therefore impermanent. In fact, all Buddhist schools agree that the six classes of sense consciousness are impermanent and conditioned.

We have seen earlier that awareness, which we've defined simply as the broad expanse of consciousness, has basically the same nature as consciousness and must obey the same laws. Therefore awareness should also be considered as impermanent and conditioned.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND BUDDHA NATURE

But what about mind, "that which knows"? When described as buddha nature, mind is considered to be ongoing and not subject to impermanence. Are these two views—the impermanent nature of consciousness and the ongoing nature of mind—completely in conflict? Must one adhere to one school and reject the other? This has, for the most part, been the case for more than two millennia of Buddhist debates. The Madhyamaka school, founded by Nāgārjuna, has long been critical of the Yogācāra doctrine of buddha nature. Within the Theravadan tradition, orthodox followers of the Abhidhamma and *Visuddhimagga*, commonly found in Burma and Sri Lanka, regard the teaching on buddha nature to be heresy. On the other hand, many teachers in the Thai Forest tradition echo views similar to buddha nature, though they don't use that term.

This is a passage from a dharma talk by Ajahn Maha Boowa, a disciple of Ajahn Mun, who was the founder of the modern Thai Forest lineage:

Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws. . . . The natural power of the mind itself is that it *knows and does not die*. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration.¹¹

In his book *One Dharma*, Joseph Goldstein tells of his own struggle to resolve the dilemma posed by these opposing views. He'd been a longtime practitioner of insight meditation as taught by the great Burmese master Mahasi Sayadaw. "From this Burmese perspective the practice of meditation leads to a freedom that transcends even awareness itself. Anything less than that is still to be caught on the wheel of life and death." But as he began to practice with Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, a Dzogchen master, he was taught that "the union of awareness and emptiness is the very nature of the liberated mind." He found both teachings to be inspiring and compelling. Goldstein recounts that the question of which was right "plagued me mercilessly."¹²

He resolved the dilemma for himself by acknowledging that he simply didn't know, and that he could embrace the meditation tools from both traditions simply as skillful means. He found great strengths and powerful techniques in both schools, and he didn't have to have a view about the ultimate nature of things in order to meditate effectively. Once he accepted that he didn't actually know the answer, he could continue to investigate the question without being bound to either view. This attitude has been very helpful to me also in meditation practice and has brought a healthy dose of humility around my own views and opinions.

As I have continued to investigate this question, it has seemed to me that there may be a way to reconcile the two different views. Some years ago, I was teaching a class at Spirit Rock for experienced meditators. We were exploring the topic of consciousness and the nature of mind from the perspectives of different schools, but I couldn't quite find the words to express an intuitive understanding I was forming of their relationship. After the class, I went to bed and slept well. Just as I was waking the next morning, an image came to mind. I'd like to introduce it with a brief preamble.

A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Let us try a thought experiment around the topic of consciousness and the unconditioned.

Imagine you are on the edge of our solar system—somewhere around the orbit of Pluto, for instance. You're comfortable in a space suit that allows you to see out. Your back is to the sun, and suppose you are looking into a part of space where there are no stars. (This is not easy to find in actual space, but this is the beauty of a thought experiment.) What do you see?

There is only black, isn't there? The sun is behind you and no stars are in front of you. It's all black. Is it the kind of black that comes from something colored black by a crayon or a paint? Or is it the kind of black that comes from a complete absence of light? It's the latter, isn't it? No light is striking your eyes. But is there light in front of you? Yes! The whole expanse of space that you're looking into is filled with light from the sun, which is behind you. (We'll say that your shadow is negligibly small.) So the empty space before you is completely pervaded by the sunlight, although you can't see it.

Now imagine that a meteor zips by in front of you. It comes from below, from the direction of your feet, and quickly zooms past, in the direction of your head. Do you see it? You do, don't you? Why? Because the meteor catches the sunlight and reflects it back into your eyes. The impression doesn't last long because the meteor has flown by so quickly, but you do see it. In fact, it is a startling burst of light in an otherwise dark and empty space. Then it is gone, but the sunlight continues to pervade the empty space, ready for the next object to come and be illuminated.

This scene is an analogy for consciousness and the unconditioned. The sunlight pervading empty space stands for the union of emptiness and cognizance, or we could say radiance. The ever-present luminosity is like the unconditioned in its unchanging steadiness. The meteor that is briefly illuminated is an analogy for the consciousness of objects. The illumination takes place only when an object appears and is very fleeting. Flash! And then it's gone. Consciousness arises only momentarily, dependent on an object.

The sunlight in space is ongoing, while the illumination of the meteor is temporary. The cognizant nature of mind continues, while sense consciousness is a

brief flashing. What is interesting, and what the analogy highlights, is that the two are made of the same stuff, light. One light is unreflected and invisible—this is the empty nature, unconditioned. The other light is reflected and visible—this is consciousness in its conditioned state. So consciousness, and by extension awareness, partake of the unchanging, unconditioned nature but are themselves conditioned arisings. This suggests that awareness is what we might call a bridge to the unconditioned, a bridge to nibbāna. This has a number of interesting implications for meditation practice that we will explore in the next chapter. For now, it's enough to say that becoming aware of awareness is a valid path to enlightenment.

OTHER IMAGES OF SUNLIGHT IN SPACE

In describing consciousness to some monks, the Buddha also used the image of sunlight. In his example, sunlight was entering a room and passing through without striking anything. Here is the teaching:

“Suppose, bhikkhus, there was a house or a hall with a peaked roof with windows on the northern, southern, and eastern sides. When the sun rises and a beam of light enters through a window, where would it become established?”

“On the western wall, venerable sir.”

“If there were no western wall, where would it become established?”

“On the earth, venerable sir.”

“If there were no earth, where would it become established?”

“On the water, venerable sir.”

“If there were no water, where would it become established?”

“It would not become established anywhere, venerable sir.”

The Buddha concludes by saying that this is an analogy for consciousness not being established anywhere, leading to the end of suffering.¹³ Notice that in this analogy, for consciousness to be unestablished does not require that the sunlight cease from shining, only that it does not land anywhere. The sunlight then pervades the empty space.

We find a similar analogy involving sunlight in space from Saint John of the Cross around 1585 in his classic treatise *Dark Night of the Soul*.

[W]e shall here set down a similitude referring to common and natural light. We observe that a ray of sunlight which enters through the window is the less clearly visible according as it is the purer and freer from specks, and the more of such specks and motes there are in the air, the brighter is the light to the eye. The reason is that it is not the light itself that is seen; the light is but the means whereby the other things that it strikes are seen, and then it is also seen itself, through its reflection in them; were it not for this, neither it nor they would have been seen. Thus if the ray of sunlight entered through the window of one room and passed out through another on the other side, traversing the room, and if it met nothing on the way, or if there were no specks in the air for it to strike, the room would have no more light than before, neither would the ray of light be visible. . . .

Now this is precisely what this Divine ray of contemplation does in the soul. . . . [B]y thus leaving it empty and in darkness, it purges and illumines it with Divine spiritual light, although the soul thinks not that it has this light, but believes itself to be in darkness, even as we have said of the ray of light, which although it be in the midst of the room, yet, if it be pure and meet nothing on its path, is not visible.¹⁴

What Saint John calls the soul, we could hear as *citta*. *Citta* is generally unaware of the Divine spiritual light (we could hear as “buddha nature”), but for one who attends to it, that light pervades the person’s being, carrying out the work of purification (we might say through nondoing).

Two other terms are used for nibbāna in the Pali Discourses—“the unborn”¹⁵ and “the unmanifest.”¹⁶ The three sunlight analogies convey well this aspect of the radiant nature: before an object appears, the light is invisible, unborn, and unmanifest. Once an object appears, the light is born and manifest. The object is then “born” in consciousness.

THE SACRED IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The image of sunlight also gives us a way to connect what is transcendent to what appears here and now through the senses. In the orthodox Theravadan view, there is the conditioned world of the six senses, on the one hand, and the unconditioned element of nibbāna, on the other. In the most traditional view, there is a stark divide between the two realms. A practitioner must completely leave behind the former in order to realize the latter. In such a view, ultimate reality can never come into the realm of the ordinary.

When we understand the mind as inherently pure in its union of emptiness and cognizance, then all that appears within the mind is held in, or touched by, this purity. The mundane is only revealed through the functioning of the transcendent and cannot be separate from it. The temporary light of consciousness is identical in nature to the stable radiance of buddha nature. The transcendent is never apart from the world. This way of seeing represents a philosophical shift in Buddhism that began with the dawning of the Mahayana. It provides a clear avenue to bring the sacred into everyday life.

Understanding the unconditioned as the ground for the sense world gives us a new way to think about nibbāna. Originally we might have conceived of nibbāna as the supreme peace characterized by the absence of any appearance, since appearances might disturb the peace. Now we can understand it as the *context* for *all* appearances. In this way it is like silence. We could take silence to be the absence of all sounds, in which case it might rarely be perceived since the world is usually a little noisy. Or silence could be understood as the vast context in which all sounds appear and disappear, in which case it can be perceived in any moment when we turn our attention to it. Space can similarly be seen as the absence of any physical object, or as the context in which all physical objects come and go. The latter understanding allows us to experience a great deal of space even in a crowded situation.

In a dialogue with a Brahmin, the Buddha pointed to this latter sense of nibbāna as the ultimate context for things. The Brahmin commented on the five physical senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body), noting that they all have different domains and so do not overlap. He then asked, “What is their resort?” That is,

if they do not touch, where do the five sense faculties come together? What is their context?

Buddha: "Mind (*mano*) is their resort."

Brahmin: "But, good Gotama, what is mind's resort?"

Buddha: "Mind's resort is mindfulness."

Brahmin: "What is the resort of mindfulness?"

Buddha: "The resort of mindfulness is liberation."

Brahmin: "What is the resort of liberation?"

Buddha: "The resort of liberation is nibbāna."

Brahmin: "What is the resort of nibbāna?"

Buddha: "This question goes too far, Brahmin. No answer can encompass it."¹⁷

So the Buddha described the context of the successive stages as the five senses, mind, mindfulness (which, in this usage, might be translated as awareness), liberation, and nibbāna. No resort or context can be given for nibbāna.

This idea of nibbāna as context appears again in another discourse:

Arising from contact are all things; . . .

Yielding deliverance as their essence are all things;

Merging in the Deathless are all things;

Terminating in Nibbāna are all things.¹⁸

Once we have discovered nibbāna as the context of all sense appearances, it is never far away. This will be helpful in the meditations we'll explore in the next chapter.

20. AWARE OF AWARENESS

Great Perfection is the inherent nature of reality.

—Dudjom Lingpa¹

IN SOME WAYS, the meditation on awareness is the simplest of all meditations. Just notice awareness. This instruction is direct, immediate, and accessible. You can do it at any time, in any posture. It doesn't require quiet surroundings or a meditation cushion. You could do it all day long if you like. Some instructions for this kind of meditation are at the end of this chapter.

The instructions at the end of the chapter are simple—but despite their simplicity, they are not easy practices to maintain. Awareness is a subtle phenomenon and does not always hold the attention easily. A friend who was practicing in Burma was assigned the blue *kasina* as an object for developing strong concentration. With *kasinas*, you visualize a colored disk, or just a color, as the sole focus of your meditation. My friend was instructed to visualize the color blue. All day long as he meditated, he tried to see just the color blue, again and again and again. It's hard to sustain, because blue is a subtle focus—and awareness itself can be even more subtle.

And yet, in a sense, meditation on awareness is a very natural practice. What could be closer to us than awareness? What could be more ever-present? What

could be more obvious? It is like what Suzuki Roshi said about Zen meditation: “This practice started from beginningless time, and it will continue into an endless future. Strictly speaking, for a human being there is no other practice than this practice.”² This is not to say that other meditation techniques are less important or helpful, only that awareness is at the very center of sentient life. Whether our attention is directed to awareness itself or we use awareness to know objects, the essence of meditation is the same: awareness.

THE PURE SPACE OF KNOWING

Ajahn Jumnien explains the meditation on awareness like this:

The best way to develop a great awareness (*mahāsati*) is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless. From this pure consciousness that’s unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world which all have the nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their dharmas of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless.³

Ajahn Jumnien’s instruction brings together a few elements of the meditation on awareness. The first is that this meditation is a style of mindfulness; in fact it is a “great mindfulness” (*mahāsati*). We have been using awareness as a near-synonym for consciousness (*viññāṇa*), but in English the word *awareness* also has connotations of intelligence that are more associated with mindfulness (*sati*) than with consciousness. The term *awareness* may slide between these two meanings of consciousness and mindfulness, and that ambiguity can be evocative in a helpful way for the meditator. As we practice being aware of awareness, perhaps what we are doing should be called “mindfulness of consciousness.” This phrasing might best align with the Pali Discourses, since consciousness, as one of the five aggregates, is a proper subject for mindfulness, as described in the fourth foundation in the *Satipatthāna Sutta*. We are now trying to notice in an intelligent way the field of sense consciousness. As there is no Pali term that is generally

translated as awareness, we can use the ambiguity in the English word and speak of being “aware of awareness.”

The second key element in Ajahn Jumnien’s instruction is to *rest* our attention. We are not trying to send the attention out toward changing objects, though they will of course continue to be known. Instead, the attention becomes rather still. This stillness is a sign of concentration (*samādhi*) and an aspect of the perception of emptiness. There is no chasing after or taking hold of sense objects.

Where does the attention rest? It is not on the breath or body or any other sense object. The attention rests “in the pure space of knowing.” *Knowing* is another English word that has multiple meanings in Buddhism. Here it refers to the simplest kind of knowing, that is, the knowing of objects, or sense consciousness. It is striking that Ajahn Jumnien calls this a “pure space.” We saw in the last chapter that consciousness, like awareness, provides a bridge to the unconditioned. This bridge is clearly indicated by the cognizant aspect of buddha nature. When we attend to knowing, we are at the borderline of buddha nature.

Consciousness is pure because the simple, mirrorlike illumination of what arises is free from the stains of greed, hatred, and delusion. Those afflictive reactions are born *in response to* the conscious experience of objects, but the knowing itself is prior to and free from those influences. What makes awareness of awareness such a powerful meditation is that it reveals a dimension within us that is already free. If we place our attention on awareness, we are connecting with that purity and are less likely to be drawn into entangling relationships with passing appearances.

Another way to describe the purity of awareness is to say that it is not stained by wanting. Consciousness has no motivation, stated or ulterior. It is not aiming to achieve anything. It simply functions to reveal things in a completely impartial way. This lack of motive is like nibbāna, which is desireless and aimless. Nibbāna is not trying to get anywhere. As we tune in to the dimension of awareness, we suffuse our being with the purity of desirelessness.

The third key part of the instruction is Ajahn Jumnien’s statement that the pure knowing is “the place of the deathless.” This aligns well with our understanding that cognizance is an ongoing part of buddha nature, not subject to arising and passing. Many Pali Discourses tell us that mindfulness inclines the

mind to nibbāna. But by placing our attention on knowing, we are not simply inclining toward the unconditioned. We are leaning on the door.

REFUGE IN REALITY

As we attend again and again to this pure space of knowing, our being starts to take root in the deathless. The purity of buddha nature, free from afflictive formations, starts to become the baseline of our experience. We don't have to do anything to cause it to be that way. It is the very nature of our mind. As we recognize cognizance, we must also continue to see emptiness, the essence of buddha nature. Then we start to intuit what Ajahn Buddhadasa was pointing to:

This emptiness is self-existent; nothing can touch it, concoct it, or improve it. [This] is the eternal state, for it knows neither birth nor death.⁴

Self-existent here means only that it was not produced by prior causes; of course there is no enduring *thing* within the emptiness. As we rest in the empty knowing, we see all the changing phenomena come and go. We do not need to follow them, because we are anchoring beyond change. This resting feels like a big relief and is deeply satisfying in a way that pleasurable sense experiences are not. Its peace leads to a great unburdening of the heart. We have found a reliable refuge—the most reliable refuge. And what are we taking refuge in? In things just the way they are: the empty cognizance illuminating appearances. We are “taking the fundamental nature of reality as the unsurpassable, ultimate refuge.”⁵

We don't seek to make appearances go away, nor do we imagine that we will discover awareness as a destination apart from appearances. In ordinary states of mind, appearances are inseparable from awareness; the only exception being those moments of enlightenment that are characterized by the cessation of sense consciousness. Otherwise, phenomena are always being revealed by awareness. The more deeply we understand the emptiness of phenomena—their fleeting, insubstantial nature—the less we are bothered by them. In Ajahn Jumnien's

phrasing, we remain “unmoved by what arises.” Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, a great Dzogchen master of the past century, put it like this:

Because all the appearances are ultimately empty and will vanish completely, we really don't have to worry about them or analyze them too much. They're really just a magical display, just like when demons conjure up some magic to fool you.⁶

When we take refuge in the deathless, the passing show loses its power to disturb us. This is the growth in equanimity that is the hallmark of spiritual development.

Sayadaw U Pandita, one of the foremost recent masters of vipassana meditation, was a Burmese master skilled in the “noting practice” of Mahasi Sayadaw. The practitioner focuses attention on psychophysical phenomena by observing them and noting “seeing, seeing,” “hearing, hearing,” and so forth. During a silent retreat, U Pandita was meeting with a student who was complaining, in a mild way, of some of the mental and physical hardships she was experiencing. The Sayadaw responded, “What do you want, different objects to note?” The Sayadaw wanted the student to understand that mindfulness, like buddha nature, does not care what objects the sense consciousness reveals. What is important is the awareness or mindfulness itself.

How complete this equanimity can become is revealed in a short account of the Sixteenth Karmapa, head of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, when he was dying in a hospital in Chicago. His students and supporters were saddened by his declining health, but each time they visited, to his doctors' astonishment, the Karmapa mustered his waning energy to sit up and smile, so his students wouldn't worry. He reassured one visitor, who seemed especially concerned about his death, “Don't worry—nothing happens.” After years—of lifetimes—of meditation on the nature of mind, his being was completely integrated with the deathless.

HOW TO PRACTICE BEING AWARE OF AWARENESS

As I've said, meditation on awareness is (on the one hand) a simple practice: Look toward awareness, see with a glance the union of emptiness and awareness, then rest there—and repeat as necessary. Let's examine each of the steps in this instruction in a little more detail.

LOOK TOWARD AWARENESS

The first step in this meditation is to look toward awareness. The more you experiment with this instruction, the more puzzling you might find it. How am I supposed to look toward awareness? Awareness is everywhere and is not specifically located anywhere. Yet any time we are asked, we know with certainty that we are aware, that awareness is present. Here are a few skillful means that might be helpful in practicing the perception of awareness.

The first is the meditation introduced in chapter 17 on Big Sky Mind. If you practice this consistently for a period of time, you will gain a good facility in directing your attention toward awareness. One of the lines of the meditation suggests this in a powerful way: "Awareness is like the sky. It's wide and empty. To see if it's like that, look directly at the nature of your own awareness."

The second approach comes out of the writings of Douglas Harding, a British philosopher who explored the mystery of consciousness and selflessness. In his book *On Having No Head*, he describes an insight that came to him as he was exploring the question "What am I?" In one moment his thinking stopped, and past and future fell away. There was no longer any sense of self. As he explored what *was* present, he found "khaki trouserlegs terminating downwards in a pair of brown shoes, khaki sleeves terminating sideways in a pair of pink hands, and a khaki shirtfront terminating upwards in—absolutely nothing whatever! Certainly not in a head."⁷ The space where a head should have been was instead a vast emptiness that held the world.

We can use Harding's description as a way to look toward awareness. Start by directing your attention outward toward physical objects, then turn it instead to look directly into your head. What do you find? Can you get a sense of the empty knowing that Harding discovered?

A variant of Harding's question begins with open eyes and noticing the visual field. Then ask the question, "Who is looking?" The question inclines one's look backward—not toward the outer objects that are being looked at but to the inner subject doing the looking. As we know from the teaching on not-self, there is no one who is doing the looking, only eye consciousness. So the question can often open up an empty space in which things are seen without a seer, emptiness and awareness joined.

Harding's question could also be phrased as "Who am I?" This was a favorite approach of Ramana Maharshi, the Indian Vedanta master who lived from 1879 until the mid-twentieth century. The question is asked not to provoke thought or find a conceptual answer, but to still the mind through sincere inquiry into the nature of the self. Many people who ask themselves this question repeatedly and wholeheartedly in a meditative environment find that it suspends the assumptions of selfhood and drops them directly into a clear perception of the empty nature of awareness.

SEE THE UNITY OF EMPTINESS AND AWARENESS

After turning toward awareness, the second step is to see the unity of emptiness and awareness in a single glance. This perception might not come easily when you begin this meditation, but it becomes much easier with practice. When I first began this practice, it was easy to see awareness, but I had to reflect to be sure I was also seeing emptiness. I used a few different questions and responses to become confident about the perception of emptiness: "Is there a self who is being aware? No, so the awareness is empty of someone who is looking. Is there a sense of space in the awareness? Yes, so that awareness is empty in the same way that space is empty. Am I seeing impermanence? Yes, so I am in touch with one of the characteristics of emptiness. Are the objects of awareness solid? No, they are just fleeting appearances, so there is emptiness in what is seen."

After reflecting along these lines many times, I became convinced that awareness was always joined with a thoroughgoing emptiness that embraced both the inner subject and the outer objects. It was not enough to answer the questions theoretically, and it was not helpful to think about them. I had to feel the truth of the emptiness directly, over and over, until eventually it became easy to

perceive the union of emptiness and awareness. Those were my questions—you may wish to find your own questions to support seeing this unity.

These kinds of reflections and questions are preliminary tools to facilitate the perception of the unity at a single glance. The meditation on awareness doesn't really begin until you can see this with one look, because the meditation needs to be nonconceptual. To root our being in awareness, we have to let go of our attachment to the thinking mind. This doesn't mean thoughts will never arise, but we have to renounce hopping happily aboard the thought train as our refuge or our path.

STAY THERE

The third step in this meditation, after perceiving the unity of emptiness and awareness, is to rest there, "in the pure space of knowing," as Ajahn Jumnien describes it. To stay or to rest means we give up any kind of purposeful effort. We don't try to see awareness or emptiness or the unity. We don't try to direct our attention or control the experience or suppress thinking. We just let things be the way they are. In other words, we simply abide in emptiness as we learned to do in chapter 12.

In the beginning, this time of resting might not last long. Thoughts, memories, sensations, or sounds come along, capture our attention, and can lead to lengthy periods of distraction. Don't be discouraged—this is to be expected. When you took the breath as the focus of our first meditation, you probably were able to notice only two or three breaths before getting lost in thinking. So, too, when awareness becomes your focus, resting in the empty space of knowing may be just a brief experience at first before you become distracted. At this stage of meditation, let go of purposeful effort and don't even try to prolong the duration of this nondistracted awareness. Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche recommends that we simply aim for "short moments, many times." However brief a time you are able to rest in the empty space of knowing, remember that for those brief moments you are close to buddha nature, close to the unconditioned, close to *nibbāna*. With practice, the duration will lengthen by itself. But that is not under our control, so there's no need to be concerned about it.

When you notice that your attention has wandered away from the immediate

experience and become captivated by thoughts or reactive emotions, simply begin the three-step meditation again. Turn your attention to awareness, notice the unity of awareness and emptiness, and rest there. As your skill in this meditation develops, you'll find that when thoughts and emotions arise in this empty space of knowing, you won't be carried away by them. They arise, are experienced, and pass away on their own. We don't need to make them go away, because that would be acting from aversion. As awareness grows stronger, we find that awareness has the power to know even potentially "sticky" phenomena, like moments of aversion, without being moved. Then the duration of the nondistracted knowing will naturally extend itself, without any effort on our part.

BENEFITS OF THIS PRACTICE

Being aware of awareness and its empty nature is a powerful practice. It can become one's primary meditation, because there are so many aspects of wisdom and skillful means embedded in it. Here is a list of ten benefits I've received from this practice.

1. Practicing with awareness, we take the *nature of reality* as our ultimate refuge. We understand that our basic nature of empty awareness is pure and ever-present. We can touch it and feel our freedom immediately. The activity of awareness ceaselessly reveals each appearance. The unity of awareness and appearances is fundamentally how things are. We trust in that, and it becomes a source of great faith. From Patrul Rinpoche, a great Tibetan sage of the nineteenth century:

Don't prolong the past,
Don't invite the future,
Don't alter your innate wakefulness,
Don't fear appearances.
Apart from that, there's not a damned thing!⁸

2. Coming back again and again to the empty nature of knowing highlights what is at the very heart of Dharma practice. After practicing this way for some time, I realized that I was tuning in to one basic choice-point

in each moment: *Is there freedom or is there grasping?* When there is freedom, there is no grasping. This is the meaning of the Buddha's third noble truth: the end of suffering is in the end of craving. When there is grasping, there is no freedom. Grasping creates the sense of a self, so in that moment one is not seeing the emptiness of self. The Buddha summarized his teaching: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to. One who has heard this has heard all the teachings. One who has practiced this has practiced all the teachings."⁹ To see empty knowing over and over requires that we let go of grasping and selfing. This is the result of being aware of awareness. This is abiding in the unentangled knowing that Upasika Kee pointed to.

3. This practice gives us another way to view the path to awakening. The Buddhist path can be seen as a gradual accumulation of many wholesome moments of effort, as pointed to in the Buddha's advice: "Don't disregard what is good, thinking, 'It won't come to anything.' By the gradual falling of rain drops, a water jar is filled."¹⁰ But the path can also be seen as *moments of the unconditioned nature peeking through the layers of obscuration* until the obscurations are worn down and that nature is uncovered in its fullness. Here we do not so much focus on generating wholesome states; rather we trust that they will shine through when we recognize the capacity of our inherent nature.
4. When the mind is very calm, awareness offers a skillful and reliable focus. When the environment is quiet and mind and body are both calm, objects can be hard to find. If we are relying on objects for deepening our meditation, we may feel adrift at such times. But awareness is always present as a reliable focus in times of calm or agitation. A student once asked Kalu Rinpoche why he should focus on awareness rather than the breath in meditation. Rinpoche replied, "Because there is no breath in the bardo." When phenomena are faint or absent, awareness is still a refuge.
5. Being aware of awareness is an excellent practice to strengthen the quality of nondoing. This practice highlights both the role of effort—returning

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to awareness after being distracted—and noneffort—resting after recognizing the union of emptiness and awareness. It shows the need for both effort and letting go of effort, and it gives clear instructions when to apply each. When you're distracted, make an effort. When you're not distracted, don't make an effort.

6. We cannot recognize the empty nature when we are straining. When we don't strain, it can appear more easily. This is the way it was put by Angelus Silesius, a seventeenth-century Christian mystic and poet:

God is a pure no-thing,
concealed in now and here:
the less you reach for him,
the more he will appear.¹¹

7. It provides an avenue for devotion, a quality that is recognized as central in many spiritual traditions. Devotion is a great support for humility and for opening the heart to what is noble and transcendent. The Buddha knew how important it is to have veneration and respect in our life and practice. Just after his enlightenment, he reflected on this:

It is painful to dwell without reverence and deference. . . . However, in this world . . . I do not see another ascetic or brahmin more accomplished in virtue, concentration, wisdom, or liberation than myself whom I could honor, respect, and dwell in dependence on. Let me then honor, respect, and dwell in dependence only on this Dhamma to which I have become fully enlightened.¹²

We are fortunate that many beings are alive today who are well developed in virtue, concentration, wisdom, and liberation. We can develop respect and devotion for people with these qualities. The historical examples of the Buddha and many great sages can also inspire us. And like the Buddha, we can revere the Dhamma that leads to liberation. As a single image of that Dhamma, empty awareness itself can have a strong devotional appeal.

8. Through this practice, we get a clear direction of where nibbāna may be found. As we tune in to empty awareness, we are linking to buddha nature, which is of the same unconditioned nature as nibbāna.
9. This meditation reveals the primacy of awareness throughout the meditative path. Mindfulness can take many different objects, but it is the *mindfulness (or awareness) itself* and not the object that is most important.
10. The most liberating view is not conceptual. Abiding in empty knowing is key, and it requires neither thoughts nor concepts nor philosophical views. As the Buddha said, “Seeing all views and not grasping them, I found inner peace.”¹³ Understanding the truth of things is the most beneficial view, and that ultimately relies on experience, not concepts. The same can be said of the four noble truths, which are equated with right view.

Being aware of awareness is a powerful approach, but it should not be considered as the only or the best meditation technique. There are times when it is extremely helpful and times when it is less so. In my experience, it's most efficacious when concentration (*samādhi*) and attention are stable. Then, when we turn toward awareness, our vision can see its union with emptiness, and our attention is steady enough to rest there for a while. When concentration is weak and one is easily distracted, it can be more helpful to focus on a simple object like breath or body to collect the attention. No one technique is always the best practice. What is best is what's suited to your body and mind in a given moment. As a general rule, when distracted, focus on a simple object to collect the attention. When the attention is collected, move to a more open approach like choiceless attention or being aware of awareness.

MEDITATION

Four Meditations on Awareness

You might like first to review the meditation at the end of chapter 18 on the unity of emptiness and cognizance. Here are four variations on this theme arranged in order of subtlety and completeness.

1. Notice awareness. Stay with that until distracted. Repeat.
2. As you notice awareness, also see its union with emptiness. Stay until distracted. Repeat.
3. Continue the second meditation until you can see awareness and emptiness with one glance. Stay until distracted. Repeat.
4. Make the third meditation your primary meditation practice. That is, do this and only this again and again for an entire meditation period.

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PART IV:
COMPASSION

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21. COMPASSION COMES FROM EMPTINESS

Just as a bird needs two wings to fly,
so a practitioner needs the two wings of wisdom and compassion.

—Tibetan saying

TULKU URGYEN RINPOCHE said that, because our experiences are empty and will vanish, we don't have to worry about them. The heart is freed from fixating on experience. This freedom of heart opens the doors for all the beautiful qualities of the mind to come forth. This is the basis for the carefree, joyful attitude that we find in great spiritual teachers.

This inner freedom born from emptiness unlocks compassion, the care for the suffering of all beings. When the mind is not preoccupied with self-concern, the heart is moved by the suffering we see in the lives of others. As the Buddha put it, "We shall abide with compassion for their welfare, with a mind imbued with loving-kindness."¹

From comments like Tulku Urgyen's, it might seem as though one's insights into emptiness and the experience of freedom would lead one to nihilistically declare that "Everything is empty, so nothing matters." This, however, is a gross distortion of awakened understanding and of the Buddhist view. The awakened understanding reveals that when one knows that everything is empty, nothing can block one's sense of freedom. The arahant Adhimutta did not object when bandits planned to kill him. Sāriputta asserted that no change in the world could

bring him sorrow.² Equanimity strengthens when we understand the implications of inner and outer emptiness. Events may no longer disturb a fully enlightened being, but it would not be correct to say that the experiences of unenlightened beings “don’t matter.” That would be the creed of nihilism.

Unenlightened beings are empty in the sense that there is no central self within our mind-body process. Our sense experiences are empty in that they are all fleeting and disintegrating. But because we don’t yet fully understand emptiness in both these senses, we continue to grasp and therefore we continue to suffer. From beginningless time, the Buddha said, we have roamed and wandered, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, suffering and swelling the cemeteries.³

All across the planet today we see the outcome of human greed, hatred, and ignorance in the enormous suffering of the victims of war, genocide, murder, rape, poverty, racism, religious persecution, and sexual abuse. We see the unbearable suffering of animals from hunting, fishing, cruel exploitation, inhumane farming methods, and human-made climate change. As the heart awakens to the freedom from our own self-inflicted oppression, we also awaken to loving-kindness for all beings in existence. We cannot help but be moved by the incredible burden of suffering carried by so many. As I write these words, tears are coming to my eyes.

This is compassion, the trembling of the heart’s natural tenderness in response to suffering. This quivering is felt keenly by an awakened being. An awakened person has surrendered the defenses that place the suffering “out there” or “somewhere else.” We know there is no inside and no outside to awareness. Everything and everyone are alive within us. Having seen the emptiness of self, we know our commonality with all living beings. We all are conscious; we all feel pleasure and pain; we all are vulnerable.

If the Buddha had felt that others’ experiences did not matter, he would never have devoted himself to teaching for forty-five years. His life as a teacher was not easy. His own monks disobeyed him, people argued with him heatedly, and more than one person tried to kill him. All the while, he continued to live simply as an ascetic monk. A visitor once asked the Buddha why he chose to live in the forest. By that time he was well-known and supported by kings. He could

have had a pleasant life in a palace near a city with servants and fine meals. He replied that he lived in the forest because “I see a pleasant abiding for myself here and now, and I have compassion for future generations.”⁴ That is, by setting the example of living simply as a renunciate in the forest, he could inspire many others to live that way in the future and thus have the best conditions for awakening.

Motivated by compassion, the Buddha sacrificed his own comfort for the welfare of others. Such selfless activity has been the model in the Buddhist tradition for thousands of years now. When one sees through the false and limiting view of selfhood, the work of the path extends beyond our individual development to take in all beings everywhere who are still prone to suffering. We wish for all beings to be happy—this is the quality of friendliness and goodwill that is loving-kindness (*mettā*). We wish for all beings to be freed from their suffering—this is the quality of caring known as compassion (*karuṇā*). As we develop in insight, we need also to develop in the growth of loving-kindness and compassion, not only for ourselves and our loved ones, but for all beings. If these generous, heartfelt emotions do not grow in a practitioner, then even a “valid” insight into emptiness can lead to a disconnected kind of nihilism.

THE WISH TO BENEFIT OTHERS

When *mettā* and *karuṇā* grow alongside insight, then the understanding of emptiness leads to even greater love and compassion. Why? Because when we let go of the burdens of self and clinging, the heart relaxes deeply and our view expands. Then, when we incline the mind toward love and compassion for others, these wholesome emotions respond strongly and easily. We discover that we really do want others to experience the same freedom and happiness that we’ve found. This deep wish for the welfare of others can become a new motivation in our practice, even before we have fully awakened.

Suppose we develop loving-kindness and sincerely wish for all beings to be happy. And suppose we develop compassion and sincerely wish for all beings not to suffer. These are easy phrases to say but more difficult to feel! It takes practice to be able to consistently and sincerely feel these wishes for others. Now let’s suppose we feel these wishes in a genuine way. We have arrived, however briefly, at

the experience of boundless loving-kindness and boundless compassion. We call them “boundless” because they extend to all beings without reservation.

You might ask, “What can I do to make these wishes come true? How can I, as a practitioner of the Buddha’s Dharma, best help other beings relieve their suffering and find happiness? Wouldn’t the best response be to bring those beings completely out of suffering and into the most reliable kind of happiness? And if so, doesn’t that imply bringing them to full awakening? How would that be possible? Won’t I need to awaken in order to truly help others awaken?”

The answer suggested in some Buddhist schools to all these questions is to cultivate *bodhicitta*, “the awakening heart.” *Bodhi* means awakening, or enlightenment, and *citta* means heart, or mind. *Bodhicitta* is the wish to become enlightened in order to help lead other beings out of suffering and into the greatest possible happiness, which is liberation. The awakening heart grows out of loving-kindness and compassion for all beings and carries with it the will to act for their benefit. This quality can be fostered by reflecting upon it frequently, as we do in the practices of love and compassion. Reflecting upon *bodhicitta* frequently generates the aspiration and encourages us to practice diligently in order to realize the aim of awakening. It can be helpful to recall the aspiration to awaken *bodhicitta* at the beginning of any period of practice by repeating a phrase like this:

By the merit of my generosity and other virtuous acts,
May I attain awakening for the benefit of all sentient beings.

The first line refers to the perfections (Pali: *pāramī*), the qualities that lead to awakening, and expresses our commitment to realize the goal ourselves. The second line expresses this aspiration as a way to benefit all beings. When *bodhicitta* grows alongside insight, it keeps us connected to others in an altruistic way and prevents the rise of nihilism or pessimism.

This altruistic motive is expressed well in a passage from Shantideva, an eighth-century Indian teacher. This verse is a personal favorite of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

For as long as space endures
And for as long as living beings remain,

Until then may I too abide
To dispel the misery of this world.⁵

The Dalai Lama himself is a beautiful personification of the spirit of *bodhicitta* in his deep commitment to continue his own practice while helping relieve the suffering of others. In commenting on his own work, he said:

Regarding service to Tibet, service to Buddhism, service to humanity . . . I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators—even those who have spent years in the mountains, practicing single-pointedness of mind—I don't lag too far behind.⁶

The Buddha strongly advised that we keep this dual motivation at the heart of our efforts:

In this way, bhikkhus, you must train yourselves. Perceiving one's own benefit, one should practice tirelessly. Perceiving the benefit to others, one should practice tirelessly. Perceiving the benefit to both, one should practice tirelessly.⁷

WISDOM AND COMPASSION TOGETHER

This is the balance of compassion (or loving-kindness) and wisdom that marks a maturity of spiritual development. If there is only dry wisdom, one's own suffering may be eased but one neglects the sense of care and connection to others. It is not that one should feel guilt or shame if such neglect is taking place. There is no moral absolutism in Buddhism that says to anyone, "You must care for others or you are a bad person!" Rather, every practitioner needs to take each step on the Buddhist path freely out of their own understanding. If there is an absence of care for others, this simply points to a way in which that person has not yet fully developed. It is natural in the early stages of this path that one's attention is primarily—or even completely—on one's own suffering. But as the path develops, the practitioner's heart becomes less burdened and their

outlook naturally starts to widen, taking in the suffering of others, humans and animals. If this connection is not strengthened, the practitioner will be neglecting an important part of their own being. It is for our own welfare that we develop love and compassion, and it is also for the welfare of others.

If love and compassion are strongly developed but the insight into emptiness is not, we have no foundation for equanimity. Every pain in the world lands on our heart with no way to understand it and no capacity to hold it. Our heart can feel broken every day with no hope of mending. With wisdom, we know that suffering is empty too. The insight into emptiness reveals that there is no actual being at the center of suffering. Suffering is only the friction between what is and what is wanted. As one meditator put it, “Suffering is rope burn,” from holding on tightly to what must eventually be pulled from our fingers. We have seen our own suffering in this way, and so we know it is also true for others, even if they don’t yet understand it. It says in the *Visuddhimagga*, “There is suffering but no one who suffers. Empty phenomena roll on.”⁸ If we don’t understand that “no one suffers,” we will be overwhelmed by each instance of suffering and will see the world as unredeemable. This excess of grief can lead to paralysis and inactivity, which benefit neither ourselves nor others. Understanding emptiness, our minds remain balanced even while we feel the suffering in the world.

Emptiness needs compassion, and compassion needs emptiness. As we saw in chapter 13, this balance is also expressed in the teachings on the divine abidings (*brahma vihāra*). There, the quality of equanimity is a necessary support for the factors of loving-kindness and compassion so that the mind doesn’t tip into their near enemies, namely, attached affection or overwhelming grief.

THERE IS NO “BEING”

Awakened seeing recognizes that there is no actual “being” present anywhere, either in life or in death. Only the aggregates are born, and only the aggregates die. This kind of insight is shown clearly in a pair of dialogues with nuns at the time of the Buddha. In the first dialogue, Māra, the powerful spirit who is the embodiment of temptation and distraction, approaches the nun Vajirā in order to frighten her and make her abandon her meditation:

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By whom has this being been created?
Who is the maker of this being?

Vajirā immediately understands that the question is posed by the tempter and answers:

Why now do you assume “a being”?
Māra, is that your speculative view?
This is a heap of sheer formations:
Here no being is found.
Just as, with an assemblage of parts,
The word “chariot” is used,
So, when the aggregates exist,
There is the convention, “a being.”⁹

Vajirā points out that “a being” is only a conventional designation for a collection of parts. The five aggregates are what actually exist, insofar as anything can be said to exist. It is they that arise and they that cease. To think that “a being” truly exists is to confuse the conventional truth with the deeper or ultimate truth. It is this confusion that makes one prey to the conventional understanding, which is limited and leads to grief and suffering. Yet this is how most of the world lives, not understanding that there is no self at the center of the aggregates, no one who owns these assemblages, and so no “being” who is born or dies.

In the second dialogue, Māra attacks the nun Selā. The image of a puppet is sometimes used to evoke the view of a body that is pushed and pulled by the forces of ignorance and craving. Māra asks Selā:

By whom has this puppet been created?
Where is the maker of this puppet?
Where has the puppet arisen?
Where does the puppet cease?

But Selā is too wise for him. She replies:

This puppet is not made by itself,
Nor . . . by another. . . .
Just so the aggregates . . .
And these six bases of sensory contact,
Have come to be dependent on a cause;
With the cause's breakup they will cease.¹⁰

Because Selā understands the empty nature of the aggregates and sense bases, she is not threatened by the thought of their dissolution. In both cases, the nuns see through him, and Māra vanishes in defeat. Death need not weigh heavily when one has clearly seen the absence of a “being” in the aggregates.

AWAKENING TO WISDOM AND COMPASSION

The promise of awakening is that when we learn to see ourselves and others from the ultimate point of view, we can be freed from confusion, grief, and suffering. We understand that there is no self within our experience, nor is there a self within others' experience. Only the aggregates arise and fall, and even they are empty phenomena. Chinese Buddhist teacher Cheng-li puts it this way: “The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?”

All the changing circumstances of the world are felt in the empty space of consciousness. There is never a “being” who can be harmed by them. Circumstances arise and pass, and it is as if they were never there.

This ultimate way of seeing is what frees the heart from the burden of its preoccupation with self. It also frees the heart from becoming overwhelmed by the suffering of others who are still bound by the conventional view of selfhood, because one knows that there is not a self there suffering—and yet one's heart still quivers with sympathy.

We might say that seeing the ultimate truth of emptiness frees the heart, while seeing the conventional truth of beings opens the heart to compassion. The more our own heart is freed from the burden of self, the more accessible to us is compassion. The fullness of spiritual life involves the development of both these faculties together so that one does not predominate to the exclusion of the other. If seeing emptiness becomes an exclusive focus, there will not be the

movement to compassion. There is then the risk of emptiness becoming a fixed view that blocks reflection on the suffering of others. As Nāgārjuna said, “Those who believe in emptiness are incorrigible.”¹¹ If compassion becomes an exclusive focus, there will not be the inner freedom and peace needed for our own balance or for helping others.

As spiritual life matures, we are able to see conventional truth and ultimate truth at the same time. We practice this by learning to see ourselves and others in both ways, through different life situations. As understanding develops, we practice shifting back and forth between the two views so we can see freedom in one moment and compassion in the next. When our understanding is mature, we see the two truths fully integrated—as one reality with two aspects. At that time, wisdom and compassion can be fused, and we practice for our own benefit and for the benefit of others, without being overwhelmed by suffering.

Acariya Dhammapala was a classical Theravadan author of several commentaries that have survived to the present day. Little is known of his life, but it seems likely that he lived in southern India or Sri Lanka some time after the great commentator Buddhaghosa, who lived in the fifth century C.E. His best-known work is *A Treatise on the Pāramīs*, which seeks to inspire the bodhisattva ideal within the Theravada school. In this passage, Dhammapala articulates the profound integration of wisdom and compassion that motivates the bodhisattva.

Through wisdom the bodhisattva brings himself across (the stream of becoming), through compassion he leads others across. Through wisdom the bodhisattva understands the suffering of others, through compassion she strives to alleviate their suffering. . . . Through wisdom he aspires for Nibbāna, through compassion he remains in the round of existence. . . . Through compassion the bodhisattava trembles with sympathy for all, but because her compassion is accompanied by wisdom her mind is unattached.¹²

The bodhisattva’s aspirations can be summarized as follows:

Crossed I would cross, freed I would free, tamed I would tame,
calmed I would calm, comforted I would comfort, attained to

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Nibbāna I would lead to Nibbāna, purified I would purify, enlightened I would enlighten!¹³

Even as an awakened being works tirelessly for the liberation of others, he or she always remembers that emptiness is the true nature of oneself, others, the aggregates and sense bases, the path, and even enlightenment. One's life and work in the world are summed up in this Tibetan saying: "My dreamlike body appeared to dreamlike beings to show them the dreamlike path to dreamlike enlightenment."

As you journey along this path of awakening, I hope that your heart will never stop responding to the many forms of suffering in this world, and that you will always have faith in your ability to find inner freedom in the midst of it. If you keep emptiness at the center, it will show you the way to the greatest freedom, and that will open the doors to a heartfelt connection to all of life. When emptiness is possible, everything is possible.