

THE THIRD TURNING of the WHEEL

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*Warm Smiles from Cold Mountains: Dharma Talks
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WISDOM of the

SAMDHINIRMOCCANA
SUTRA

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of phenomena. They hear about the three kinds of character from the buddha—the imputational, the other-dependent, and the thoroughly established—and then they study them. And when they know each one, they know that the first character is characterless, the second character is afflicted, and the third character is purified or purifying. When they understand the first character, they abandon the afflictive character of the second one and realize the purified or purifying character that is the third one. That is how bodhisattvas are wise, and that is how beings become free of suffering through wisdom.

It is not unusual for people to have doubts about these teachings. As a matter of fact, it's a normal part of the process of learning. By revealing and disclosing your lack of faith in the teaching that you are an other-dependent phenomenon, you will eventually melt away the root of your doubt and your resistance to the teaching. Once you become intimate with other-dependent phenomena, you can study more clearly how you impute characteristics to them. The more you understand how you impute things, the more you see that actually it's just a fantasy. And when you see the absence of that fantasy, you are looking at suchness itself.

chapter six

THE LACK OF OWN-BEING OF PHENOMENA

AFTER TELLING US about the three characteristics of phenomena in the previous chapter, the buddha goes on to explain the three ways phenomena lack own-being, or essence. This is a much longer chapter and is deeper and more difficult. Like the other chapters, a bodhisattva is questioning the buddha. His name is Paramarthasamudgata. *Paramartha* is "ultimate truth," and *samudgata* means "arisen" or "born from," so his name is "arisen from ultimate truth."

This bodhisattva starts by giving a long list of the things that buddha seemed to have taught to have own-character, or own-being. For example, Paramarthasamudgata says: "The Bhagavan has spoken in many ways of the own-character of the aggregates and further spoken of their character of production, their character of disintegration, and their abandonment and realization. Just as he has spoken of the aggregates, he has also spoken of the sense spheres, dependent origination, and the sustenances.

"The Bhagavan has also spoken in many ways of the [own-] character of the [four] truths and further spoken of the realization [of suffering], abandonment [of the source of suffering], actualization [of the cessation of suffering], and meditative cultivation [of the path]." (95)

But then Paramarthasamudgata goes on to point out that the buddha also taught "that all phenomena lack own-being, that all phenomena are unproduced, unceasing, quiescent from the start, and

naturally in a state of nirvana." So Paramarthasamudgata wants to know, "Of what was the Bhagavan thinking when he said, 'All phenomena lack own-being, all phenomena are unproduced, unceasing, quiescent from the start, and naturally in a state of nirvana?'" (97)

Buddha first talks about the character of all phenomena, and then he says that all phenomena lack their own character. There seems to be a contradiction. So Paramarthasamudgata asks, "What were you thinking when you taught that all phenomena lacked own-being after teaching about the own-character of all phenomena? In other words, what did he have in mind when he taught the Prajna Paramita literature? In the *Heart Sutra*, for example, it says that the five aggregates that make up human experience lack own-being, that all the aggregates are empty. But earlier the buddha seemed to have taught that the aggregates do have own-being. So Paramarthasamudgata is asking, How come you say that aggregates don't have own-being, when earlier you taught that they did?"

Notice that bodhisattva Paramarthasamudgata doesn't ask him why he taught the own-character of phenomena first. Rather, he asks him, "Why did you teach differently later? Of course, that also implies the question: Why did you teach differently at the beginning? And the answer I would give is that if the buddha had taught the ultimate truth at the beginning of his teaching, his students probably would have had a very distorted and unhealthy interpretation of Buddhist practice and Buddhist teaching. So he gave them a provisional teaching on the nature of reality. What he gave them was a teaching that allowed them to dismantle their belief in the self of the person but continue to believe in the self of phenomena, like the aggregates. In that way, they wouldn't say, "Well, everything is empty, so nothing matters. People are empty of self, and the precepts are empty of self, too, so forget the precepts." He knew the precepts were an essential foundation for the whole path. So he taught a way that would encourage people to continue to practice meditation and follow the precepts while they gradually give up their belief in the imputations

of self they project on people. Then later, when people were ready, he was able to teach them that all phenomena are empty, even the teachings. That's why he gave the other teaching first, even though it was actually false, in a way. The second teaching was really true, but it was easily misunderstood. Then the third teaching was given to protect us from that misunderstanding, and to help us see the way our tendency to make conventional designations and imputations shapes our perception of phenomena.

As he does in the previous chapters, the buddha responds by praising the questioner for his wonderful motivation. After all, he is the bodhisattva "arisen from ultimate truth," and he probably knows the answer already, so he isn't asking this question for himself, but for the benefit of all beings everywhere. "Paramarthasamudgata, your thought, virtuously arisen, is good! It is good! Paramarthasamudgata, you are involved [in asking] this in order to benefit many beings, to bring happiness to many beings, out of sympathy for the world, and for the sake of the welfare, benefit, and happiness of beings, including gods and humans. Your intention in questioning the Tathagata about this subject is good!" (97-99)

The Three Types of Lack of Own-Being

Then the buddha says something like: "Well, actually in the back of my mind when I taught that one kind of lack of own-being, I was thinking of three kinds of lack of own-being. And the three types of lack of own-being that I was thinking about were a lack of own-being in terms of character, a lack of own-being in terms of production, and an ultimate lack of own-being. That's why I taught that all phenomena lack own-being."

But notice that his answer is not so much about why he taught in this new way but what his deeper intention was when he was teaching that everything is characterless and lacks own-being. And what he had in mind was three types of lack of own-being that were never

mentioned before this sutra. Those three types of lack of own-being are the other shoe dropping relative to the three characters taught in the previous chapter. As we will see, the three characters are actually the three types of lack of own-being, as well. They are characters, but they are also three different modes of lacking own-being.

Next, the buddha goes on to look at each of the three types of lack of own-being, one after the other. "Paramarthasamudgata, what is the lack of own-being in terms of character of phenomena? It is the imputational character. Why is this? The [imputational character] is a character posited as names and symbols, but it does not subsist by way of its own character. Therefore, it is the 'lack of own-being in terms of character.'" (99) So the character lack of own-being is the imputational character of phenomena—the way that the imputations you make lack own-being. They are just empty imaginings, fantasy, a dream. The sutra calls them a "sky flower," which of course is something that appears to exist but actually doesn't. Our imputations have no real substance, and nothing about them has any independent reality.

Then the buddha turns to the production lack of own-being. "Paramarthasamudgata, what is the lack of own-being in terms of production of phenomena? It is the other-dependent character of phenomena. Why is this? The [other-dependent character] arises through the force of other conditions and not by itself. Therefore, it is the 'lack of own-being in terms of production.'" (99) What is production? Production means arising or birth. The way they happen doesn't have a self, and what's happening is not produced by itself. So you can look at it both ways. All things are other-produced. The other upon which things depend is also other-dependent, and it too lacks own-being.

This lack of own-being in terms of production is the other-dependent character of phenomena. Nothing is produced by itself; thus, everything has a self-production lack of own-being. You are not produced by yourself. Your practice is not produced by itself. Your body

is not produced by itself. We are other-dependent phenomena. We are dependently co-arising phenomena. We therefore have a lack of own-being in terms of production.

One of the difficult aspects of the sutra is that the other-dependent is actually two kinds of lack of own-being. In the buddha's words: "Phenomena that are dependently originated lack an own-being due to the lack of own-being in terms of production. They also lack own-being due to an ultimate lack of own-being. Why is this? Paramarthasamudgata, I teach that whatever is an object of observation for purification of phenomena is the ultimate. Since the other-dependent character is not an object of observation for purification, it is an ultimate lack of own-being." (99–101) The other-dependent character, what we have called the mystery, lacks an essence in terms of its production, but it also has an ultimate lack of own-being, or essence. But it is not the same ultimate lack of own-being as the thoroughly established. Thus, there are two types of ultimate lack of own-being. One type is the actual ultimate lack of own-being, which is the selflessness, the emptiness, of phenomena. The other type of ultimate lack of own-being is the lack of being the ultimate itself. It is the lack of being the object for purifying phenomena. So one ultimate lack of own-being is selflessness itself, which is the thoroughly established. But there is another type of ultimate lack of own-being, which is the mystery—the other-dependent character of phenomena—that is the very absence of the other type of ultimate lack of own-being. Not only is form emptiness, but form is the lack of emptiness. Not only is emptiness form, but emptiness is the absence of form.

I've often wondered what the buddha was thinking of when he taught these two types of ultimate lack of own-being. How can there be two true ultimate lacks of own-being? Well, there really aren't. Why did he say there were? I think it is because the other-dependent and the thoroughly established are so intimate that he felt that he had to use these two types of own-being to help us distinguish their relationship correctly. The problem is that there is a tendency, which

has come up many times among my students, to think that once there is no more confusion of our thinking with the other-dependent, then the other-dependent is the ultimate. That's why the buddha called it an ultimate lack of own-being, because the other-dependent actually lacks being the ultimate truth. It is mentioned specifically because there is a tendency to look for the thoroughly established in the other-dependent, in the mystery, as though the essence of the mystery is the thoroughly established. But they're actually not the same. The other-dependent lacks the ultimate lack. This is a core issue of this chapter, and it's a difficult one.

Finally, the buddha moves on to the thoroughly established character of phenomena: "Moreover, Paramarthasamudgata, the thoroughly established character of phenomena is also 'an ultimate lack of own-being.' Why is this? Paramarthasamudgata, that which is the 'selflessness of phenomena' is known as their 'lack of own-being.' That is the ultimate. Since the ultimate is distinguished as the lack of own-being of all phenomena, it is an 'ultimate lack of own-being.'" (101) Thus, the ultimate lack of own-being is the thoroughly established character of all phenomena. The ultimate lack of own-being is the way things ultimately and truly are, and when you look at things the way they really are, you are liberated. When you look at things that way, your mind and body become purified of confusion and affliction. So, it's not an abstract philosophic truth. It's a truth of spiritual liberation. When we see the ultimate lack of own-being of phenomena, we are liberated. And not only are we liberated in relationship to our daily life, but by continually meditating on this ultimate lack of own-being, our liberation becomes more and more integrated in our body and being and behavior, and we evolve toward buddhahood.

A Meditation Program

After the buddha describes the three characteristics of phenomena and the three types of lack of own-being that correspond to the three

characters, the sutra presents a meditation program—a program that shows us how to enter into all these teachings. The buddha says that for people who have not yet planted the roots of virtue, people who have not purified their obstructions, who have not ripened their continuum, who do not have much conviction, who have not completed the accumulation of wisdom and merit—in other words, for people like most of us—he first teaches about the lack of own-being in terms of production. He teaches meditation on the other-dependent or, if you will, studying the mystery. That's the first step. And by studying the other-dependent, you will be transformed. You will turn from unskillful behavior to virtue. Then you will be ready to study the imputational character, and finally you can turn to the study of the thoroughly established. But you can't go right to the thoroughly established. First, you have to become grounded in the other-dependent, in the conventional world where things seem to be happening, and where you confuse the imputational with the other-dependent. Then you turn to studying the lack of own-being in terms of character. You see that in the process of imputation you attribute essences in terms of character and attributes to things. Understanding that this imputation is a lack of own-being in terms of character—that it lacks any essence or independent substance—helps you understand the absence of this imputation in the other-dependent. Thus, understanding the characterlessness of the imputational character helps you understand the thoroughly established character, which is exactly that absence.

You start with the other-dependent, move on to the imputational, and then hopefully you discover the thoroughly established, and you meditate on that. But you keep studying and meditating on the other-dependent. It's not sufficient by itself, but you keep doing it all the time because it's the foundation of the thoroughly established. You can't see the thoroughly established unless you're also meditating on the other-dependent. It's the base from which you see the ultimate truth.

When you start meditating on dependent co-arising and the other-dependent character of phenomena, you become more and more aware that there's a confusion between what you think they are and what they really are. Then you notice that when there's no confusion, you can't see anything. It's kind of mysterious. So you go back to where you can see things, and you notice that the confusion comes back. Then you study that, and study that, and study that, until the moment comes when you see suchness. But suchness is seen in relationship to the other-dependent that you've been meditating on all along.

Meditating on the Other-Dependent

The buddha begins by telling Paramarthasamudgata, "I initially teach doctrines starting with the lack of own-being in terms of production to those beings who have not generated roots of virtue, who have not purified obstructions, who have not ripened their continuums, who do not have much conviction, and who have not completed the accumulations of merit and wisdom. When they hear those doctrines, they understand dependently originated compounded phenomena as being impermanent. They know them to be phenomena that are unstable, unworthy of confidence, and changeable, whereupon they develop aversion and antipathy toward all compounded phenomena." (107)

Notice that he says when beings have heard this teaching. He doesn't say when they know it, or when they see the other-dependent character. He says when they hear the teaching about it. So part of honoring the other-dependent character is to hear these teachings. But I don't think he meant that we just have to hear the teachings once. I think he means that we should hear them pretty often. In fact, you have to hear the teaching until it is in your heart all day long. Every time you look at something, somebody is in your ear saying: "This thing has an other-dependent character. This phenomenon is

a lack of own-being in terms of self-production. This thing can't produce itself. This thing can't keep itself going another moment." Until you have a little buddha in your ear telling you that, you have to work to always keep this teaching before you. You need to remember the teaching until it runs through your mind all the time.

This is the basic meditation, and when you move on to other meditations, this meditation should continue. After a while, it is just like your heartbeat. So one way to honor the teaching is to listen to it, and repeat it over and over again to yourself. Another way to honor it is by reading about it, reciting it, and talking to others about it. You can also honor what the teaching points to; you can honor the way phenomena really are. Of course, other-dependence isn't the whole story about how phenomena really are, but it is the fundamental character of the way they are. So we start to train ourselves by meditating on this teaching, training ourselves to open our wisdom eye to the actual nature of phenomena, rather than the misconceived or mistaken way that phenomena are seen to be.

One way to get at this meditation is to receive what is given. When something happens, receive it. Understand that what's happening is given to you. Then meditate on that, and look to see whether or not you are receiving what's given, or whether you actually think you make what's happening happen. There is a bodhisattva precept (it's number two of the ten grave precepts) called "Not taking what is not given." If you have a body or a thought, and you don't think it's given, don't take it. Give up the mode of taking action. If an action is happening, see it as being given to you, because in fact it is being given to you.

The usual way we think is "I'm making my actions." You know that way. Now we're trying to learn a new way, which is "I'm receiving my actions." Believing in self-power, or the imputational character called self-power, we get things by taking them rather than by having them given to us. As we meditate on the other-dependent character of our moment-by-moment life, we move from a feeling of pride or shame