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The View of Vajrayana

IN TIBET, IT IS SAID THAT THE VAJRAYANA DOES NOT HAVE ITS OWN DISTINCTIVE philosophical position or “view.” Instead, the view of Vajrayana is provided by the Mahayana, including both the second and third turnings of the wheel of dharma comprising the teachings on emptiness of the second turning and the teachings on the three natures and the buddha-nature of the third turning. This is not to say that the Vajrayana does not have its own way of articulating Mahayana philosophy. In fact, the teachings of the second and third turnings appear in a distinctive way in the Vajrayana, in the context and the idiom of tantric meditation. Nevertheless, the basic understanding of reality present in the Vajrayana is essentially Mahayanist, and to have a correct understanding of the Vajrayana, one needs some grounding in the Mahayana philosophy.

The fact that the Vajrayana does not possess its own distinctive philosophical view makes sense when we consider that this tradition is essentially meditative in nature, containing various practices for attaining enlightenment in one lifetime. In fact, in Tibet, the Vajrayana is sometimes known as *upaya yana*, meaning the yana of skillful means (*upaya*). This refers to the rich array of methods contained in the Vajrayana by which practitioners may advance toward the goal of realization.

THE SECOND TURNING AND THE VIEW OF EMPTINESS

Subsequent to the first turning of the wheel of dharma, in order to lead his followers deeper into the nature of reality, the Buddha gave a second turning near Rajagriha, at Vulture Peak Mountain, in which he presented the teachings on emptiness. These are most quintessentially set out in the Prajnaparamita, a genre of sutra with many different extant versions, and also in the Madhyamaka, a philosophical tradition providing commentary on the Prajnaparamita Sutras. The teachings on emptiness as found in the Prajnaparamita, other sutras, and the various Madhyamaka schools are referred to in Tibet as the “doctrines of the second turning.”

As we saw in the last chapter, the teachings on emptiness are critical for the Vajrayana practitioner, because they establish the ultimately open and nonobjectifiable nature of reality. This means that the *subject* – the practitioner – is ultimately nonexistent in any solid or definitive sense; he or she is a process that can never be pinned down or solidified. The *object* of the practice, such as the deities encountered in tantric ritual, are equally empty and beyond any thought or characterization. And the various *practices* themselves are beyond objectification or quantification. Without such a view of the world of practice as empty in this sense, the practitioner would quickly fall prey to the enticements of spiritual power and gain. This, as mentioned, would lead to the religious megalomania of Rudra.

According to the view expressed in the Prajnaparamita Sutras, there are three basic levels possible to human beings in the perception of reality. First is the ordinary samsaric view that

takes conventional reality at face value, believing that “I” really exist as a substantial, continuing entity. The second, deeper level is that of the Hinayana, in which one realizes that the apparently solid and enduring “I” is an illusion and is actually a superficial label attached to the endless flow of experiential moments, the dharmas mentioned in the last chapter, classified according to the five skandhas.

The third and most profound perception of reality is that of the Mahayana. Here, not only does one realize that the superficial, conventional world is illusory; in addition, one sees that the more fundamental substrate of dharmas, identified by Hinayana, that make up our experience, is also illusory and contrived. In other words, just as we project the concept of “I” upon a reality that does not accord with this notion, so at the Hinayana level we also project the ideas of dharmas, of skandhas, of samsara and nirvana, onto a reality that is quite beyond such designations.

What is this ultimate reality that does not correspond to the Hinayana ideas of samsara and nirvana and so on? This is just the point: that reality cannot be put into words or concepts. In fact, from the Mahayana viewpoint, that was where the Hinayana went wrong, in trying to set up a definitive problem (samsara), a definitive reality (that of the dharmas), and a definitive answer (nirvana).

The short Prajnaparamita text known as the *Heart Sutra* responds to the Hinayana analysis by looking at the experience of the first skandha, form, the experience of matter or physicality.¹ The text says, “Form is emptiness.” Emptiness in this context means devoid of any objectifiable essence or defining characteristic. When we say “form,” in other words, there is nothing in reality corresponding to our idea. The *Heart Sutra* is saying in essence, “What form really is, is actually empty of whatever it is we may think of when we say ‘form.’” There is no such substantial and definitive thing as “form.” We may think that form exists in some substantial and objectifiable way, but this is a false projection upon reality; this is no different from the way in which we may imagine the existence of the “self,” which also is a fallacious and finally empty projection.

The text continues, “Emptiness also is form.” That is to say that emptiness, the absence of objectifiability, is encountered within, in the very midst of our experience of what we think of as form. Further, “Emptiness is no other than form.” In the Prajnaparamita, as the primary sutras of the second turning of the wheel of dharma, emptiness is said to be the nature of ultimate reality. The text now makes reference to the ultimacy of emptiness. It is saying, “If you are looking for emptiness, this ultimate, where will you find it? You will find it nowhere else but only *as form*.” In other words, in looking at form, we sense its insubstantiality. In this way, we sense emptiness. It is not that this “ultimate reality” called emptiness exists in some other place as a thing. No. It exists as the final nature of form, the first skandha.

Someone may object that his or her experience of form certainly seems solid and defined by certain definite characteristics. The Prajnaparamita contends, however, that seeming solidity of form is a trick we play on ourselves. If we look deeply into our experience of form, we will begin to see that there is something fluid and ungraspable about it, and that we react to this intangible nature of form by labeling it “form” and thinking of it in a certain solid and definite way.

The text then says, "... and form is no other than emptiness." In other words, it is not that there are some forms that are empty of any "essence" and other forms that are not empty. No. Form, any form whatever, is fundamentally empty of any essence or own being. It is the very nature of form to be empty in this way.

The text continues, "In the same way, feeling, perception, formation, and consciousness are emptiness." In other words, what was just said about the first skandha is also true of the other four skandhas: they are emptiness; emptiness itself is they; emptiness is no other than they; and they are no other than emptiness. Then we read: "Thus all the dharmas are emptiness. ..."

This statement makes the point that whatever experiences we may have, they are all marked by emptiness. This applies even to the rather solid and definitive readings of the dharma given in Hinayana. The *Heart Sutra*: "There is no suffering; no origin of suffering; no cessation of suffering; no path; no wisdom; no attainment and no nonattainment." The text is not denying the Hinayana experience; it is not saying that at the Hinayana level one does not experience these things. Of course, at that level of spiritual maturity, one does experience these things, and they do exist as stated.

However, according to the *Heart Sutra*, there is a deeper level to which we need to go. We need to look more closely at our experience. Take the example of suffering. If we bring the actual phenomenal experience that we label "suffering" before our eyes and contemplate it with a still mind, we will find in that experience nothing that corresponds to what we think of when we say "suffering." Suffering is a gross and inaccurate label that is applied to reality that is ... is what? That is the point. Nothing can be attributed to it.

The text continues: "Therefore, since the bodhisattvas have no attainment, they abide by means of prajnaparamita; since there is no obscuration of mind, there is no fear. They transcend falsity and attain complete nirvana. All the buddhas of the three times, by means of prajnaparamita, fully awaken to unsurpassable, true, complete enlightenment." In other words, the teachings on emptiness are the vehicle by which the buddhas have journeyed to realization, and the full recognition of emptiness represents their awakening.

The *Heart Sutra*, then, like the other Prajnaparamita Sutras, outlines a view of reality consisting of two truths. Ordinary people live on the level of relative truth where "form" – as a metaphor for what we normally experience – is taken as self-evident and real. When one sees, however, that form is in fact empty of any characteristic of "form," that its essential nature is emptiness, then one has come face to face with ultimate truth, the truth of emptiness.

The teachings on emptiness are subtle and challenging to follow, and they sometimes seem to be little more than abstract philosophizing. Particularly to most Westerners, it is not immediately clear what, if anything, these teachings have to do with the practical spiritual life. In fact, the teachings on emptiness make the bodhisattva path possible. This is so because the bodhisattva is asked to return again and again to samsara, to work for the welfare of sentient beings in all of their conditions of suffering. This is no small commitment, for one is vowing to take repeated rebirth not only in the human realm and the other "higher realms" of the gods and jealous gods, but also in the "lower realms" of the animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings. The bodhisattva's commitment is to spend three incalculable eons exploring every nook and cranny of samsara, learning about the sufferings of sentient beings by being reborn

in every situation and condition of their misery. For it is only through such a heroic journey that one can finally attain the realization of a fully enlightened buddha and know every iota of the pain and confusion of those whom he wishes to save.

The daunting prospect of the bodhisattva's commitment is possible only because he or she realizes that, however solid and eternal the various samsaric worlds may appear to be, that solidity and permanency are only a projection. Moreover, even one's "suffering," "confusion," and "unenlightenment" are again projections upon a reality that is beyond characterization and beyond thought. It is only thus that the bodhisattva can cycle through samsara endlessly, not as a victim of its illusions, but as one who sees the essentially empty nature of the entire phenomenal display. And it is only because of his insight that he or she can be of genuine assistance to those still trapped in ignorance.

The recognition of the emptiness of one's projections leads to a feeling, as Trungpa Rinpoche says, of an empty heart. This empty heart has nothing to say for itself, nothing to assert, nothing even to hope for or – as the *Heart Sutra* says – to fear. However, such an empty heart is one that is ever available to others. It is one without agenda, but with a ready tenderness and responsiveness to another person's suffering and confusion. A realization of emptiness, then, is the precondition for genuine compassion. And such an empty heart, though desolate from ego's standpoint, is an expression of the wisdom that sees the utter and unbreachable freedom of our essential being.

For the Vajrayana practitioner, the teachings on emptiness provide an indispensable foundation of the tantric path. For example, as we saw in the last chapter, it is part of the spiritual journey that one sees more deeply into one's own confusion and egotism and also that one attains moments of unexpected freedom and joy. Coming face to face with one's darkness can lead one to become disheartened. The teachings on emptiness say, "Look closely into your discouragement or depression; see what is really there. If you look deeply enough, you will pass beyond the concept that you are holding and will behold that which you are labeling face to face." Invariably, what one finds is not what one thought as there; it is not something that can be pinned down in any way. It is open, unbounded, and inseparable from the ultimate, emptiness.

In a similar fashion, again as mentioned, insights and feelings of clarity and bliss may lead one to feel very happy. One may well take this as some kind of attainment and try to incorporate it into one's "view" of oneself. At this moment, pride and arrogance will arise. The teachings on emptiness remind the practitioner that his or her belief that something has been gained is equally a projection and is empty in essence. In other words, one was becoming inflated over literally nothing. Realizing this fact acts as a pin puncturing the balloon of one's puffed-up "spiritual" ego.

In this way, the teachings on emptiness call into question every painful and depressing experience, as well as every pleasurable and inflating experience. These teachings are saying, "Things are not what you think; if you think things are a certain way, take a closer look. You cannot make anything out of your experience." The reason is that to make something out of your experience, you have to have some idea of what your experience is. Only then can it be of service to your ego. However, your experience is, really and truly, beyond words and concepts; it is empty. Therefore, you are left with nothing to make anything out of. Only when you remain in this open and indefinable space can the tantric journey continue.

The teachings on emptiness are expounded, as noted, in the sutras that belong to the second turning of the wheel of dharma, principally the Prajnaparamita Sutras. These teachings in India and Tibet became the source of a rich, sophisticated, and extensive philosophical tradition known as Madhyamaka. Whereas the Prajnaparamita texts are known as *buddha-vachana*, buddha word, because they are held to have been spoken by the Buddha, the texts of the Madhyamaka are commentaries on the Prajnaparamita composed by scholars and practitioners on the path. The founder of Madhyamaka, as mentioned in chapter 1, was the great sage Nagarjuna (second-third century CE), who composed a number of texts considered the root texts of Madhyamaka, including the *Mulamadhyamaka-karikas*, verses on the root teachings of Madhyamaka. Nagarjuna was followed by a series of Indian Buddhist scholars, who appeared over the course of one thousand years, and by an equally illustrious succession of Tibetan scholars belonging to all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

The importance of Madhyamaka is that it takes the teachings of the second turning as its foundation. While in the Prajnaparamita, these teachings on emptiness are given without argument or comment, in the Madhyamaka they are presented in the form of logical arguments and philosophical reflections that reveal how the opposite of emptiness, namely substantial existence, cannot be maintained. In the course of the vast Madhyamaka corpus, every conceivable human opinion about reality is made the subject of philosophical scrutiny, and none can stand up to the light of wisdom. Each human concept about reality is like a building that begins to waver, then crack, and finally collapse as a result of the earthquake of emptiness.

In Tibetan monasteries, and particularly those of the Gelukpas and the Sakyapas, the teachings of the second turning of the wheel of dharma, both sutras and the shastras of the commentarial tradition, are the centerpiece of scholarly training. Monks undergoing the academic training will typically spend many years studying the various arguments and positions of Madhyamaka, memorizing hundreds and even thousands of pages of texts in the course of their work. In addition to memorization, they hear lectures by masters and hone their skills of logic and reasoning in the ancient tradition of monastic debate.

While all of this study may seem far removed from the cave of the tantric yogin, in fact it is not. In all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism, it is believed that by training the mind thoroughly in the Madhyamaka, one is laying a foundation that is essential for successful Vajrayana practice. That is why, as we saw in chapter 3, Geluk monks wishing to undertake tantric practice must first complete the many years of scholarly training in which the Madhyamaka forms the essential core.

THE THIRD TURNING: YOGACHARA AND BUDDHA-NATURE

According to Tibetan tradition, later in his life, in the North Indian town of Shravasti, Buddha Shakyamuni turned the wheel of dharma for a third time. The content of the third turning is twofold, including both those teachings associated with the classical Indian Yogachara school and those concerning the buddha-nature. Although in Indian Buddhism,

these two streams of thought had somewhat distinct histories, in Tibet they are understood as aspects of one unified teaching.

According to the *Sandhinirmochana Sutra*, where the third turning is first articulated, when the Buddha turned the wheel of dharma this third time, he presented the ultimate, definitive “view” of the Mahayana. We read in the *Sandhinirmochana Sutra* that the first turning concerns the Hinayana, deals with relative truth, and is provisional and surpassable. The second turning presents the Mahayana teaching on emptiness, articulates the view of the ultimate, but is also not complete. The third turning brings the Buddha’s promulgation of the “view” to completion, in which the relative and the ultimate are seen in proper relation to one another.

Why did the Buddha feel the need to give a third turning of the wheel of dharma, when the second, as we have seen, presents the view of ultimate reality, emptiness? According to the *Sandhinirmochana Sutra*, the commentaries of Asanga and his school, and the buddha-nature texts, the Buddha gave the teachings of the third turning because the very presentation of the second turning on emptiness, by virtue of its relentless and single-minded propagation of shunyata, could too easily be misunderstood by practitioners as nihilism.

The teachings on emptiness, as we have seen, are designed to dissolve fixations so that one may come face to face with reality. However, the dissolution can itself all too readily turn into a project. And, in order to have a project, one has to have an end point or goal that one is projecting. In every situation, then, one can begin to look for emptiness. But to look for emptiness, one has to have an idea of what emptiness is. Thus, one can fall into the trap of using one’s concept of emptiness to address, to try to handle, one’s experience.

The concept of emptiness – although certainly not the reality of it – can be taken as nihilistic. This is so because as it appears in the texts, emptiness is the absence of any characteristic or essential nature. Nothing that we conceive through the apparatus of the skandhas has any inherent existence. In its essential nature, it does not exist. Holding this as a view, and using it as a tool or technique to relate with one’s life, can lead to a nihilistic denial of the relative world.

If we hold emptiness as a concept and take this view of the relative, then we will have no interest in it. In psychological terms, our libido will have been disconnected from the relative world. This means that we will be unwilling to connect with it and feel no obligation to relate with it. We may treat karma as utterly nonexistent and see its operation as not worth respecting. And we will regard the suffering of sentient beings as unimportant and not to be taken seriously, since it does not exist.

Worse than this, emptiness can be viewed as a panacea. It can be used as a weapon against relativity. One may ask, what is wrong with this? For an unenlightened person, judgments about relativity are always being made: this is uncomfortable, this is not; this I like, this I don’t like. If one has only the second turning of the wheel of dharma as a reference point, it is all too easy to use one’s concept of emptiness to minimize and discredit those aspects of relativity that one does not like. This may be carried out under a guise of “spirituality.” For example, when one experiences certain emotions or states of mind as “nonspiritual,” one may try to remove their sting through applying emptiness.

But what if, karmically, this is something that we need to live through? What if this leg of our journey requires us to face and fully experience something very painful? In that case, we have cut off our progress and repressed that state of mind once again, thus creating more negative karma for ourselves.

In this case, emptiness has become a way of avoiding and dismissing – on “spiritual grounds” – the first noble truth, the truth of suffering. Emptiness does not mean that suffering is utterly nonexistent, only that its energy cannot be objectified or definitively pinned down in any way. Such a point of view does not remove the “charge” of suffering, but leaves it in the realm of the ungraspable.

The Three Natures

In the Tibetan view, the Buddha addressed this problem by giving the third turning of the wheel of dharma, with its twofold teachings on the “three natures” and on the “buddha-nature.” In the Yogachara texts, the Buddha expands on the second-turning teachings on the two truths, ultimate (in which emptiness is seen) and relative (in which phenomena are thought to be substantial). Now the Buddha speaks of three natures. The first is *parikalpita*, the “imaginary nature,” conceptualized reality, which is illusory and empty, like the “relative truth” of the second turning. Then there is *parinishpanna*, the “perfected nature,” the mind that is resting in the ultimate, which is analogous to the “ultimate truth” of emptiness of the second turning. In addition, however, the Buddha also speaks of *paratantra*, the “dependent nature,” which is not so explicitly designated in the second turning. Each of these three natures has a particular ontological status. The imaginary nature (*parikalpita*), conceptualized reality, is utterly nonexistent because what it claims exists, essential natures, in fact is purely an illusion. The dependent nature (*paratantra*) is dependently existent, a notion presently to be explained. And the perfected nature (*parinishpanna*) is completely existent in the sense that the emptiness of realization is beyond birth and death, and indestructible.

If the imaginary nature corresponds to relative truth in the second turning and the perfected nature is analogous to ultimate truth, then how is the dependent nature to be understood? The great Indian commentator on the third turning, the master Asanga, explains the dependent nature by asking an interesting question. When we project a relative world made up of truly existing things – which are utterly nonexistent – are we merely making them up, based on nothing? Are we just projecting our concepts into a vacuum? Or might there be some substrate that is serving as a basis of our projections? Asanga says that there is indeed such a substrate, although it is not one that can be labeled or conceptualized, because in that case we would be right back into the imaginary nature, which is utterly nonexistent. However, there is a substrate that is ineffable. That is the world of appearances that arise in accordance with the operation of karma. According to Asanga, there is the attribution of “form,” which in itself does not exist. But there is a karmic situation, beyond our thinking process, that gives birth to a complex of causes and conditions that we are then led to label “form.”

For Asanga, there are two kinds of relativity, that of the conceptualized imaginary nature, which we might call impure relativity, and the nonconceptualized world of karma, the dependent nature, which we might call pure relative truth. It is this latter that the Buddha saw at the moment of his enlightenment: he saw the causes and conditions according to which the

entire wheel of samsara revolves. In other words, when the Buddha had passed utterly beyond the illusory, conceptualized reality of the imaginary nature, he attained the perfected state, the perfected nature. In the moment of his enlightenment, the Buddha did not see nothing. His experience of enlightenment had content, as it were: the entire realm of causes and conditions, as it truly is, with nothing left out.

Based on this way of looking at things, we could describe samsara and nirvana in the following way. Samsara is viewing the pure relative world, the dependent nature, through the filter of concepts in which we attribute self-nature to things. This is the imaginary nature. Nirvana consists in seeing the pure relative world, the dependent nature, as the Buddha did on the night of his enlightenment, devoid of the imaginary nature. This is the perfected nature.

The teachings of the three natures have important implications for the path. They indicate that phenomenal experience is actually composed of two elements. On the one hand, there is the conceptualized overlay, the imaginary nature, which needs to be abandoned. But on the other, there is the substrate of karma, the dependent nature, that exists relatively and needs to be acknowledged and respected. Through taking the ineffable substrate seriously, through being willing to travel through it as a walkway, there can be a path and there can be transformation. This is so because until enlightenment, life consists in the arising and resolving of karma; this can only occur if one is willing to relate to that arising – which is inherently ineffable – but to do so without conceptualizing it. If, by contrast, one either takes the imaginary nature as real or seeks to dismiss the dependent nature as utterly nonexistent, there can no longer be any journey. Then, as one sometimes finds among spiritual practitioners, the process of the path is frozen and one abides in a wasteland of emptiness.

In the Vajrayana, as we shall see, the process of tantric mediation brings the pure relative truth of the world into view. On the one hand, through meditation on emptiness, one abandons one's own defiled, conceptual versions of reality. On the other, through visualizing the world as the pure abode of the tantric deities, one realizes the splendor of manifestation beyond ego. The process is progressive: through the visualization, one continually calls up the relative world in its nonconceptual purity. This brings about a process of gradual "purification" (*vishuddhi*) in which one is gradually disabused of one's view of reality as impure and laden with the conceptual dirt of ego. One's perception grows into "sacred outlook" (*tag-nang*), in which the truth of the pure dependent nature and its inseparability from the perfected nature are realized on a tantric level, as the inseparability of appearance and emptiness.

Buddha-nature

The second major teaching given by the Buddha in the third turning of the wheel concerns the buddha-nature and is contained in a number of important sutras on this topic. In Tibet, the most important text on the buddha-nature is the *Uttara-tantra Shastra*, a commentary attributed to the future buddha Maitreya. This shastra contains quotations from many of the most important buddha-nature sutras, arranged to highlight the most important aspects of this doctrine. In the *Uttara Tantra*, the root verses by Maitreya are accompanied by Asanga's verse and prose commentary. The text was brought to Tibet during the second spreading and has become the subject of a number of important traditions of interpretation.

According to the *Uttara Tantra*, within each sentient being is the actual nature of a buddha. This is not a seed that will one day grow into the full nature of a buddha; rather, it is, at this moment, that very nature. The nature of a buddha is the dharmakaya, the “body of reality,” the mind of enlightenment itself. What is this buddha-nature like? Its essence is emptiness; its nature is complete clarity and cognizance; and it manifests compassion. It is this dharmakaya, this enlightenment, already in itself mature and complete, that exists within the heart of all sentient beings.

If we human beings possess this enlightened core as our very basis, then why are we so confused and why do we suffer? The reason, according to the *Uttara Tantra*, is that the buddha-nature is covered over by defilements of all sorts. These defilements are adventitious – that is, they are not essential. They in no way actually damage or blemish the buddha-nature, they merely hide it from our view. Thus we go about our lives, feeling beleaguered and lost, unaware that this jewel of inestimable worth resides in our very heart.

In the *Uttara Tantra*, many analogies are given to illustrate how the buddha-nature is covered over and hidden yet never compromised or damaged. For example, the buddha-nature is said to be like an image of the buddha wrapped in some dirty, tattered rags lying by the side of the road. The rags represent one’s phenomenal personality, how one views oneself. When you first see it, it may seem like a worthless pile of garbage – which is certainly how we sometimes feel about ourselves. Yet, when we look closely into this seemingly worthless rubbish, when we take the trouble to unwrap the rags around it – and we do this through the practice of meditation – we make the miraculous discovery of the resplendent buddha within.

There is a tendency among Western Buddhists to identify the buddha-nature with a mind that is open, clear, and expansive, that is untroubled by the chaos of experience. This certainly is one basic way in which the buddha-nature can show itself, particularly in our meditation practice. Many meditators are always looking for the buddha-nature as this untrammelled clarity, which brings with it a settled and peaceful feeling.

But there is far more to the buddha-nature than this, and it manifests in our lives in countless other ways. In order to understand some of these other ways, let us personify the buddha-nature for a moment, and ask some questions. For example, what is the “intention” of the buddha-nature? It is to lead us to – or push us in the direction of – full and perfect enlightenment. What is this enlightenment? It is our full presence to ourselves, our unbroken awareness of the fullness of our being, in which our compassion can flow forth spontaneously, in whatever way it will given our karma and our gifts.

What stands in the way of this goal of spiritual maturation? Only our mistaken concepts of ourselves, our rich and defensive ego structure. What is an example of where the buddha-nature is at work? In fact, the buddha-nature operates in all people all of the time. It is said that the universal experience of suffering is a manifestation of the buddha-nature. It is the message that our egoic versions of reality are inadequate and cannot bring about lasting satisfaction or comfort. How does the buddha-nature move us forward? Through revealing to us the shabbiness and hollowness of the ego that we are trying to maintain, through showing us the inadequacy of the ways in which we try to allay pain and control our lives.

Meditation practice is the primary Buddhist way for softening and relaxing the rigidity of ego and for providing space for awareness outside of the ego mechanism to grow. Yet the

path of meditation is challenging, for it mostly consists of seeing through our own posturing and pride, unraveling our self-deception, and recovering dimensions of our person that – because of the pain cloaking them – we ignore and repress. Those who devote themselves to a life of meditation often find themselves face to face with the most difficult of emotional upheavals and egoic inflations and deflations as their awareness grows and they integrate more of what they are in their totality. This vivid and often excruciating process is itself a manifestation of the buddha-nature.

The buddha-nature works also in other ways. For example, it may often be said to be “behind” certain dramatic occurrences, such as when a relationship collapses, we lose a job, we fall gravely ill, someone close to us dies, or some other catastrophe befalls us. At that moment, our carefully constructed and maintained world falls to pieces. At such a time, when everything else is more or less in complete disarray, the buddha-nature is there, as openness, tenderness, and intelligence that transcends the ups and downs. Practitioners can take very great advantage of such “catastrophes” and use them to deepen their own sense of being.*

The buddha-nature obviously exists in all people, whether they are Buddhists or not, and regardless of the level of their commitment to a spiritual path. Though human beings try to ignore it, the buddha-nature is always in the background, trying to break through the walls of ego, to lead us to a deeper and fuller way of being. It is at the basis of who we are as human beings. Nevertheless, it sometimes happens that we try to hold on to a very narrow way of being, some adaptation that we bring from earlier in our lives. In this event, we sometimes find that the harder we try to hang on to some old, constricted way of being, the more pressure the buddha-nature exerts. Often, the buddha-nature will break through in the most surprising and unexpected ways, causing temporary demolition of aspects of our adaptation. If people absolutely resist the inner imperative to grow, the buddha-nature can manifest itself in even more drastic ways and the consequences can be calamitous, at least from ego’s viewpoint.

The tantric journey is directed to uncovering the buddha-nature within, and this is not an easy or painless process. It has been said that, in the journey to awakening, the buddha-nature does not particularly care what our personalities have to go through or how difficult the process may be. Our deepest nature is uncompromising and will not let any of us stray very far from the path. It will ultimately put up with nothing short of enlightenment. Meditation is a way of “sacrificing to the gods,” of making a positive relationship with the buddha-nature so that the journey, while painful and challenging, at least continues in the direction of awakening and takes advantage of each turn in the road.

In the Vajrayana Buddhism of Tibet, the teachings on buddha-nature are considered a source of unbounded confidence, certainty, and joy. One may wonder, particularly in light of the more daunting aspects of the buddha-nature, how this could be so. The reason is simple: the buddha-nature doctrine shows us that the seemingly problematic aspects of our lives are gateways to a deeper and fuller mode of being. Suffering, deflation, and life’s other difficulties are all manifestations of our basic, enlightened being, calling us forward. Moreover, the unending stream of ego-defeats that characterizes the life of even the most “successful” person represent continual opportunities to wake up, to soften up, to expand our

* Occasionally, it may also be a positive occurrence that shatters our habitual world, the most notable being when one “falls in love.”

awareness, to see more. The teachings on buddha-nature represent a kind of unconditional positivity – that whatever occurs in life, and particularly the more difficult situations, provides a tangible opportunity to come closer to who we are.

As we shall see, in the Vajrayana one visualizes oneself as a fully enlightened buddha. This visualization gives imaginative representation to our own buddha-nature within, which is otherwise inaccessible. Through enacting the tantric liturgies, one's own sense of being a separate, egoic self gradually dissolves and is replaced by the buddha-nature. This is not a new identity and has nothing in common with the old egoic identity that is being released. Rather, it represents the ability to rest in the open, empty, cognizant nature that is the very core of our being. In the Vajrayana, one thus trains to live in terms of the buddha-nature, not thinking of oneself as a solid and discrete entity, and to act, but without need for the deliberate and self-referential strategies of the self-conscious "I." In this way, then, the Vajrayana, based on the second-turning teachings of emptiness, represents the actualization of the teachings of the third turning of the wheel of dharma.

¹ The translation quoted here is that of the Nālandā Translation Committee.