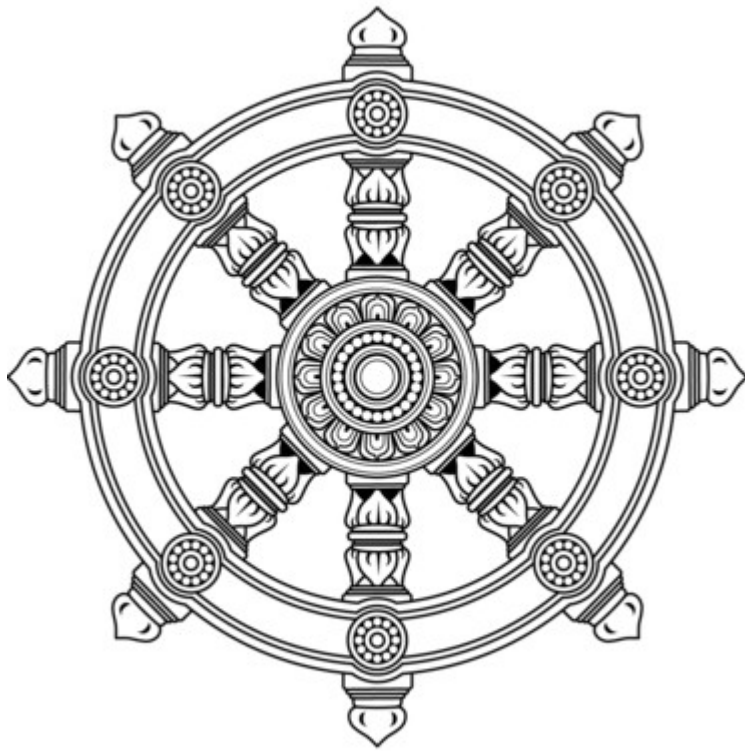


II

The Nature of Visual Awareness



It Is the Mind That Sees

“Ānanda, a moment ago you said you saw my fist send forth light. What caused my fist to send forth light? How did I make the fist? And what were you seeing it with?”

Ānanda replied, “The Buddha’s body is the color of crimson-tinted gold from the River Jambu. His body is like a mountain of precious stones. It sends forth light because it is born of purity. With my own eyes I saw his hand when he held it up for us and made a fist by curling his wheel-imprinted fingers.”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “Now the Thus-Come One will demonstrate a truth for you. Following the wise, who use analogies as aids to understanding, Ānanda, let us use my fist as an analogy. Without a hand, I couldn’t make a fist. Without your eyes, would you be able to see? Are these two situations similar?”

Ānanda replied, “They are, World-Honored One, because without my eyes, I couldn’t see. Therefore the Thus-Come One’s making a fist can be compared to my using my eyes.”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “You say they are comparable; however, they are not. Why? A person with no hands will never make a fist. But one whose eyes do not function will not be entirely unable to see. Why? If you asked a blind man on the street, ‘Do you see anything?’ he would no doubt reply, ‘All that I see in front of me is darkness — nothing more.’ Reflect upon what that might mean. Although the blind man sees only darkness, his visual awareness is itself intact.”

Ānanda replied, “It’s true that all a blind man sees before his eyes is darkness, but can that really be what we call ‘seeing’?”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “Is there any difference between the darkness seen by the one who is blind and the darkness seen by sighted people when they are in a completely darkened room?”

“No, World-Honored One, there is no difference between the darkness seen by sighted people in a completely dark room and the darkness seen by the blind.”

“Then suppose, Ānanda, that the blind person, who has been seeing only darkness, now sees before him a variety of objects because suddenly he has regained his sight. In such a case, you would say it is his eyes that see. Therefore, when a sighted person who has been seeing only darkness in the darkened room now sees before him a variety of objects because someone has suddenly lit a lamp, you’d have to say, by analogy, that it is the lamp that sees. Now if a lamp could see, it would no longer be what we would call a lamp. Moreover, if it were the lamp that sees, what would that have to do with that sighted person?

“Thus you should know that, in the analogy, the lamplight simply reveals visible objects; it is the eyes that see, not the lamp. In actuality, the eyes themselves simply reveal visible objects; it is the

mind that sees, not the eyes.”

2

Visual Awareness Does Not Move

Ānanda and the others in the great assembly had not understood what they had heard and so were silent. But they hoped that they would hear the Thus-Come One continue to proclaim the teaching. Putting their palms together, they cleared their minds and waited for the Buddha to compassionately instruct them.

Then the World-Honored One stretched forth his arm and opened his shining, cotton-soft, finely webbed hand, revealing the wheel-shaped lines on his fingers. To instruct Ānanda and the others in the great assembly, he said, “After my awakening, I went to the Deer Park, where, for Ājñātakaṇḍinya’s sake and for the other four monks, and also for all of you in the four assemblies, I said that beings in their multitudes have not become Arhats, nor have they become fully awake, because they are confused by afflictions that are like visitors and like dust. What in particular, at that time, caused the five of you to awaken and become sages?”

Then Ājñātakaṇḍinya stood up and said respectfully to the Buddha, “Of all the elders here in this great assembly, I was the one who was given the name ‘Ajñāta,’ meaning ‘one who understands,’ because I had come to realize what ‘visitor’ and ‘dust’ signify. It was in this way that I became a sage.

“World-Honored One, suppose a visitor stops at an inn for a night or for a meal. Once his stay is ended or the meal is finished, he packs his bags and goes on his way. He’s not at leisure to remain. But if he were the innkeeper, he would not leave. By considering this example of the visitor, the one who comes and goes, and the innkeeper, the one who remains, I understood what the visitor signifies. He represents transience.

“Again, suppose the morning skies have cleared after a rain. Then a beam of pure light from the rising sun may shine through a crack in a door to reveal some motes of dust obscuring the air. The dust moves, but the air is still. Thus by consideration of this example — the dust, which as it moves obscures the air, and the air, which itself remains still — I understood what the dust may signify. It represents motion.”

The Buddha said, “So it is.”

Thereupon the Thus-Come One, before the assembly, made a fist with his wheel lined fingers, and having made the fist, he opened his hand again. Once his hand was open, he made the fist again and said to Ānanda, “What did you see just now?”

Ānanda said, “I saw the Thus-Come One, before the assembly, open and close his hand over his resplendent wheel lined palm.”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “You saw me here before the assembly open and close my hand. Was it my hand that opened and closed, or did your visual awareness open and close?”

Ānanda said, “It was the World-Honored One’s resplendent hand that opened and closed before the assembly. Although I saw his hand open and close, my visual awareness neither opened nor closed.”

The Buddha said, “What moved and what was still?”

Ānanda said, “The Buddha’s hand moved, but my awareness is beyond even stillness; how could it have moved?”

The Buddha replied, “So it is.”

Then from his wheel lined palm the Buddha sent forth a ray of resplendent light that flew past Ānanda to his right. Ānanda immediately turned his head and glanced to the right. Then the Buddha sent a ray of light to Ānanda’s left. Ānanda turned his head again and glanced to the left. The Buddha said to Ānanda, “Why did you turn your head just now?”

Ānanda said, “I saw the Thus-Come One send forth a wondrous ray of shining light which flew past me on my right; then another ray flew past me on my left. My head moved as I looked to the right and to the left.”

“Ānanda, when you glanced at the Buddha’s light and moved your head to the right and left, was it in fact your head that moved, or else was it your visual awareness that moved?”

“World-Honored One, it was my head that moved. The nature of my visual awareness is beyond even stillness; how then could it have moved?”

The Buddha said, “So it is.”

Then the Thus-come One told everyone in the assembly, “All beings need to understand that whatever moves is like the dust and, like a visitor, does not remain. Just now you saw that it was Ānanda’s head that moved, while his visual awareness did not move. It was my hand that opened and closed, while his awareness did not open or close. How can you take what moves to be your body and its environment, since they come into being and perish in every successive thought? You have lost track of your true nature, and instead you act out of delusion. Therefore, because you have lost touch with your mind’s true nature by identifying yourself with the objects you perceive, you keep on being bound to the cycle of death and rebirth.”

When Ānanda and the great assembly had heard the Buddha’s teachings, their bodies and their minds were serene. They realized that since time without beginning they had strayed from the fundamental, true mind. Instead, they had been mistaken about the conditioned objects of perception and had made distinctions about what are in fact nothing but shadowy mental events. Now they all had awakened, and each was like a lost infant suddenly reunited with its beloved mother. Putting their palms together, they bowed to the Buddha. They wished to hear the Thus-Come One reveal the contrasting qualities of body and mind — what is true and what is false about them, what is real and what is insubstantial, what comes into being and then ceases to be, and what neither comes into being nor perishes.

Visual Awareness Does Not Perish

Then King Prasenajit stood up and said to the Buddha, “Before I was instructed by the Buddha, I met Kātyāyana and Vairāṭiputra. Both of them said that after this body dies, we cease to exist and become nothing. That very nothingness itself is what they called nirvana. Now, though I have met the Buddha, I still have doubts that make me cautious. How can I come to realize the true and fundamental mind that neither comes into being nor perishes? All in this great assembly who have outflows wish to hear the answer.”

The Buddha said to the king, “May I ask, is your body as indestructible as vajra, or is it subject to decay?”

“World-Honored One, this body of mine will keep on changing till in the end it will perish.”

The Buddha said, “Your Majesty, you have not perished yet. How is it that you know you will perish?”

“World-Honored One, my body is impermanent and subject to decay, although it has not perished yet. But now, upon reflection, I can see that each one of my thoughts just fades away, followed by a new thought which also does not last, like fire turning into ash, constantly dying away, forever perishing. By this I am convinced that my body, too, must perish.”

The Buddha said, “So it is. Your Majesty, you are in your declining years. How do you look now, compared to when you were a boy?”

“World-Honored One, when I was a child, my skin was fresh and smooth, and I was full of vital energy when in my prime. But now in my later years, as old age presses upon me, my body has withered and is weary. My vital spirits are dulled, my hair is white, my skin is wrinkled. Not much time remains for me. How can all this compare to the prime of life?”

The Buddha said, “Your Majesty, your body’s appearance cannot have deteriorated suddenly.”

The king replied, “World-Honored One, the change has in fact been so subtle that I have hardly been aware of it. I’ve reached this point only gradually through the passing of the years. Thus when I was in my twenties, I was still young, but I already looked older than I did when I was ten. My thirties marked a further decline from my twenties, and now, at two years past sixty, I look back on my fifties as a time of strength and health.

“World-Honored One, as I observe these subtle transformations, I realize now that the changes wrought by this descent toward death are evident not only from decade to decade; they can also be discerned in smaller increments. Considering more closely, one can see that changes happen year by year as well as by the decade. In fact, how could they happen merely year by year? Such changes happen every month. And how could they occur from month to month only? These changes happen

day by day. And if one contemplates this deeply, one can see that there is ceaseless change from moment to moment, in each successive thought. Thus I can know that my body will keep on changing till it perishes.”

The Buddha said to the king, “Observing these changes — these never-ceasing transformations — you know that you must perish. But do you also know that when you perish, something in you does not perish with you?”

Putting his palms together, King Prasenajit replied to the Buddha, “Indeed I do not know.”

The Buddha said, “I now will reveal to you what it is that does not come into being and does not perish. Your Majesty, when you first saw the River Ganges, how old were you?”

The king replied, “I was three when my beloved mother took me to pay respects to the goddess Jīva. When we went past a river, I knew that it was the Ganges.”

The Buddha said, “Your Majesty, you said that when you were in your twenties, you had already aged compared to when you were ten. Year after year, month after month, day after day, in each successive thought there have been changes till you have reached your sixties. Consider, though: when you were three years old, you saw the river; ten years later, when you were thirteen, what was the river like?”

The king replied, “It looked the same when I was thirteen as it did when I was three, and even now, when I am sixty-two, it is still the same.”

The Buddha said, “Now you are mournful that your hair is white and your face is wrinkled. Your face is certainly more wrinkled than it was when you were in your youth. But when you look at the Ganges, is your visual awareness any different from your visual awareness as it was when you saw the river in your boyhood?”

The king replied, “No different, World-Honored One.”

The Buddha said, “Your Majesty, your face is wrinkled, but the essential nature of your visual awareness itself has not wrinkled. What wrinkles is subject to change. What does not wrinkle does not change. What changes will perish. But what does not change neither comes into being nor perishes. Then how could it be affected by your being born and dying? So you have no need to be concerned with what such people as Maskari Gośālīputra say: that when this body dies, you cease to exist.”

The king believed the words that he had heard, and he understood that when we leave this body, we go on to another. He and all the others in the great assembly were elated at having gained a new understanding.

The True Nature of
Visual Awareness Is Not Lost

Ānanda then stood up, bowed to the Buddha, knelt, put his palms together, and said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, if our visual awareness and our awareness of sounds, too, indeed do not come into being and do not perish, why then did the World-Honored One say that we have lost track of our true nature and our actions are deluded — as if we were upside-down and not right-side-up? I hope the World-Honored One, out of kindness, will clear away the dust of our delusions.”

At that time, bending his golden-hued arm so that his wheel-lined fingers pointed downward, the Thus-Come One said to Ānanda, “Here you see my hand as it forms a mudra. Is it upside down, or is it upright?”

Ānanda said, “Ordinary people would take it to be upside down. I myself do not know what may be called upright and what is upside down.”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “If ordinary people would take this to be upside down, what then would people consider to be upright?”

Ānanda said, “They would call it upright if the Thus-Come One raised his arm so that his hand, which is as soft as cotton, was pointing upward in the air.”

Then the Buddha raised his arm and said to Ānanda: “Ordinary people are deluded if they suppose that reversing the way my arm is pointing means that my arm itself has changed. And if, in the same way, we compare the bodies of ordinary people to the pure Dharma-body of the Thus-Come One, we might describe the Dharma-body of the Thus-Come One as endowed with ‘right and all-encompassing knowledge,’ and ordinary people’s bodies as upside down. But consider more carefully this comparison of the Buddha’s body with your bodies, which are said to be upside down. Where, exactly, might the characteristic ‘upside down’ be found?”

At this point Ānanda and the others in the great assembly were dazed. They stared unblinking at the Buddha. They did not know where, in their minds and bodies, the characteristic “upside down” might be.

The Buddha out of kindness took pity on Ānanda and on everyone else assembled there. He spoke to them in a voice that swept over them like the ocean tide. “All you good people! I have often said that all phenomena with physical form, all phenomena of mind, the conditions under which they arise, as well as the phenomena that interact with the mind and all other conditioned phenomena, are mere manifestations of true mind. Your bodies and your minds appear within the wondrous light of the true essence of that wondrous mind. How is it that you all have lost track of the wondrous nature of the fundamental, marvelously perfect, wondrously understanding and resplendent mind, so that your under-

standing of it is confused?

“Out of darkness, a mental void appears, and this dark void condenses to create a subtle object of mind. What characterizes this distorting mental activity is that it leads to the coming into being of the embryonic body. An internal confluence of causes distorts this body and directs its attention outward. At this stage there is confused agitation, and we take this agitation to be the true nature of the mind. Once we take this initial confusion to be the mind, we are committed to the delusion that the mind is inside the physical body.

“What you do not know is that the true, wondrous, luminously understanding mind contains the body and everything outside the body — mountains, rivers, sky, the entire world. You are like someone who fails to see a boundless ocean a hundred thousand miles across and is aware only of a single floating bubble. You see that bubble floating there and think it is the vast tide that surges toward the farthest branchings of the sea. Within your confusion you are confused further, just as you were about my lowered arm. The Thus-Come One says you are to be pitied.”

5

Visual Awareness Is Not Dependent upon Conditions

Clasping his hands, Ānanda wept, mindful that the Buddha had compassionately rescued him and had bestowed upon him a profound teaching. He said respectfully to the Buddha, “Having heard the Buddha speak these marvelous words, I comprehend that my wondrously understanding mind is perfect at its source and that it is the everlasting ground of my mind. I understand the Dharma that the Buddha has just spoken. I see that I have been revering the Buddha with my conditioned mind. But, because I have only just now learned about my wondrously understanding mind, I do not dare as yet to accept it as my mind’s fundamental ground. May the Buddha in his all-pervading voice compassionately give further instruction about this in order to uproot my doubts and bring me back to the supreme Path!”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “You and others like you still listen to the Dharma with conditioned minds, and therefore you fail to understand its real nature. Consider this example: suppose someone is pointing to the moon to show it to another person. That other person, guided by the pointing finger, should now look at the moon. But if he looks instead at the finger, taking it to be the moon, not only does he fail to see the moon, but he is mistaken, too, about the finger. He has confused the finger, with which someone is pointing to the moon, with the moon, which is being pointed to.

“Moreover, his mistake about the finger shows he has failed to distinguish light from dark, in that he has confused what is dark — the finger — with what is light — the moon. He does not know the difference between the nature of light and the nature of darkness. In this way, he is like you.

“If you understand your mind to be what makes distinctions when you hear me speak about the Dharma, then that mind of yours would necessarily exist on its own, apart from my speaking, which it is making distinctions about. By analogy, a traveler who stops at an inn may stay for a night; he then goes on his way. He does not live there all the time, unlike the innkeeper, who, as the host, does not go anywhere.

“In the same way, if what makes distinctions when you hear me speak were truly your mind, then it would not go anywhere. But could the nature of the mind be such that it makes distinctions about sound independently of sound? And the mind that makes distinctions about my voice also makes distinctions about my appearance. What makes distinctions about visible objects cannot do so independently of the visible objects it distinguishes. Your mind that makes distinctions does not exist independently of the objects that it distinguishes. And when the making of distinctions ceases such that neither space nor objects are distinguished — the state that Maskari Gośālīputra and the others wrongly call the ‘truth of the unmanifested nature’ — even then, your mind does not have a distinction making nature that exists independent of objects of mind. Thus each of your mental states is dependent on

something else. They are not like the host of an inn.”

Ānanda said, “If each of my mental states is dependent on something else, then is the fundamental, wondrously understanding mind of which the Thus-Come One speaks also dependent on something else? I only hope that the Buddha will take pity on us and explain.”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “As you see me now, the fundamental, luminous essence of visual awareness is not the wondrous, essential, understanding mind; nevertheless, it can be compared to a second moon rather than to a reflection of the moon.

“Listen attentively. I will now show you what does not depend on anything.

“This great lecture hall, Ānanda, opens to the east. Thus when the sun rises, the hall is flooded with light. But the hall is in darkness in the middle of the night if the moon has not risen or if the sky is obscured by clouds or fog. Further, one can see out through cracks in the doors and shutters, but the walls and roof block the view. Where the various objects are distinguished, we can perceive how they are related to one another, but where there are no objects, space is all that one sees. Where mists or clouds of dust are present, objects are obscured or distorted. Once the mist has dispersed or once the dust has settled so that the air is pure again, one can again see everything clearly.

“Ānanda, you have all observed how aspects of these phenomena will change. Now I will show you how the presence of each of them depends on a condition necessary to it. What are the conditions necessary to these changing phenomena, Ānanda? The sun is a necessary condition for sunlight, since there can be no sunlight without the sun. Therefore the sunlight is dependent upon the sun, which is a necessary condition for its presence. The moon’s absence is a necessary condition for the darkness in the hall. Cracks in the doors and shutters are necessary conditions for your being able to see out. The walls and roof are necessary conditions for the view being blocked. Distinguishing the various objects is a necessary condition for observing how they are related to one another. The absence of objects is a necessary condition for seeing only space. Mists and clouds of dust are necessary conditions for obscuring or distorting our visual awareness of objects. Dispersal of the mist and the settling of the dust are necessary conditions for seeing clearly again. And every act of seeing the changing phenomena of this world belongs to one of these types.

“Consider these eight types. What would you say is the necessary condition for the presence of the understanding nature that is the essence of your visual awareness? If the presence of light is a necessary condition for your visual awareness, then when light is absent so that it is completely dark, you would not be able to see the darkness which in fact you do see. Your mind makes distinctions about light and darkness and the other phenomena, but the essence of your visual awareness does not make these distinctions. Clearly then, the mind that experiences these conditioned phenomena is not what is fundamentally you. But what is not these conditioned phenomena must be what is fundamentally you. If it is not you, what else could it be?

“Know then that your mind is fundamentally wondrous, luminous, and pure. You have confused yourself and have lost track of what is fundamental. Constantly drifting and drowning, you have become sub-merged in the sea of death and rebirth. That is why the Thus-Come One says you are to be pitied.”

Visual awareness Is Not a Perceived Object

Ānanda said, “Now I recognize that the nature of my visual awareness is that it does not depend on anything else. But how can I come to know that it is my true nature?”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “I will continue to question you. Aided by the Buddha’s wondrous power, you can now see clearly all the way to the heavens of the first dhyāna. You do not yet have the purity of freedom from outflows, but Aniruddha, who is free of outflows, sees the entirety of Jambudvīpa as plainly as one might see an amala fruit placed in the palm of one’s hand. Bodhisattvas at their various stages can see hundreds of thousands of worlds and more, and there is not one of the infinite numbers of Pure Lands that the Thus-Come Ones in the ten directions do not see. Ordinary beings cannot see with such clarity as this, even for a fraction of an inch.

“Ānanda, you and I can now see the palaces where the Four Celestial Kings reside. Between there and here, we can see forms and shapes that move on land, in the water, and through the air, in light and in shade. All these are perceived objects that you can distinguish as solid, and among them you should be able to distinguish what is you and what is not you. I am now asking you to choose, from all that lies within your visual awareness, what is essentially you and what are perceived objects. If you employ the power of your vision to its fullest extent, Ānanda, you will be able to see as far as the Sun Palace and Moon Palace. All that you will see are objects; they are not you. Carefully observe everything as far as the seven circular ranges of golden mountains; everything that you will see, even the various sources of light, will be an object; it will not be you. Again, step by step, observe the clouds in motion, the birds in flight, the wind blowing, the dust rising, the trees, the mountains, the rivers, the plants, the people, and the animals. All are objects of your perception. None of them is you.

“Ānanda, all these perceived objects, near and far, have their own distinctive nature; nevertheless, all are seen within the purity of the essence of your visual awareness. Each kind of object is distinguished as different from the others, but there are no such distinctions in the wondrous understanding of the essence of your visual awareness. This visual awareness is in fact the pure and wondrous understanding mind. “If visual awareness were a perceived object, then would you not be able to see my visual awareness as an object? You may argue that you do see my visual awareness at the moment when we are both looking at the same thing. But when I am no longer looking at that thing, then would you still see my visual awareness? Even if you had been able to see my awareness when you and I were looking at the same thing, clearly you will not be able to see my awareness once I begin looking at something else. And since you cannot see my awareness when you and I are looking at different things, clearly my visual awareness cannot be an object. Therefore, how could your own

visual awareness not be what is fundamentally you?

“Otherwise, when you see an object, the object would see you as well. If visual awareness and its objects were intermixed like that, you and I and everything else in the world would be immersed in chaos. But, Ānanda, when you are aware of something, it is you, not I, who are aware of it. The essential nature of your visual awareness pervades everything. If it is not yours, whose could it be? Why do you doubt that it is your true nature? Why don’t you accept it as genuine and instead ask me what is true?”

7

Visual Awareness Has
Neither Shape Nor Extension

Ānanda then said respectfully to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, I accept that my visual awareness, with its capacity to understand, cannot be other than mine. The Thus-Come One and I are looking now at the halls of the Four Celestial Kings, which are adorned and resplendent with superb treasures; our glance has lingered on the Sun Palace and Moon Palace, and then our visual awareness has extended to fill the entire Sahā world. However, when we return our gaze to this pure hall and look upon this sanctuary only, we do not see beyond the roof and the walls.

“World-Honored One, that is how our visual awareness is. First it extended throughout a world; now it is confined to this one room we are in. Did our awareness contract to fit into the room, or did the walls and ceiling divide our awareness up, enclosing part of it and leaving the rest outside? At this point, I don’t know which one of these alternatives is right. I hope that the World-Honored One will bestow his great kindness upon us and will explain this point to us.”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “Everything visible in the world — whether large or small, whether inside this hall or outside of it, whatever kind of thing it is — may be an object of our visual awareness. Do not say your awareness itself expands and contracts.

“Let us consider an example: suppose you are looking at the space inside a square box. Let me ask you: is the space you see inside the box fixed there in a cubical shape, or is it not? If it is, then if it were transferred into a round box, it would not become round. If, on the other hand, it is not fixed in a cubical shape, then there can’t have been a cube of space in the box in the first place.

“You said that you don’t know which one of your alternatives is right. What you said about the nature of visual awareness can be compared to what I said about the space in the square box. In truth, neither the awareness nor the space can have a location.

“Do you want to say the space in the boxes is neither square nor round? Simply remove the boxes, and you’ll see that the remaining space indeed has neither shape. You can’t say that when the boxes are removed, you would still be able to remove a cube or a sphere of space.

“Besides, suppose your visual awareness does contract when you enter a room, as you suggest. Then why, when you look up at the sun, does your awareness not expand till it reaches the sun’s surface? Suppose, again, your visual awareness does divide when walls and ceilings are interposed; then why, if someone drills a hole through one of the walls, will there be no evidence of a linkage created as your divided awareness expands through the hole to reconnect itself? These ideas of yours cannot be right.

“From time without beginning, all beings have mistakenly identified themselves with what they are aware of. Controlled by their experience of perceived objects, they lose track of their fundamental minds. In this state they perceive visual awareness as large or small. But when they’re in control of their experience of perceived objects, they are the same as the Thus-Come Ones. Their bodies and minds, unmoving and replete with perfect understanding, become a place for awakening. Then all the lands in the ten directions are contained within the tip of a fine hair.”

8

Visual Awareness Is Both Separate
and Not Separate from Objects

Ānanda said respectfully to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, granted that my visual awareness is indeed my wonderful true nature; then this wonderful nature must be what appears before me. But if my visual awareness is in fact really my true nature, what is the mind that I experience in my body? The mind that I experience in my body is able to make distinctions, whereas my visual awareness does not make distinctions, even about my own body. But if my visual awareness is really my mind and is what causes me to see, then the essential nature of this visual awareness is what is truly me, and so my body is not me. Is not my objection, though, the same as the objection that the Thus-Come One made previously, namely, that perceived objects cannot see me? Bestow upon us your great kindness and explain this to us who have not yet awakened.”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “What you have just said — that your visual awareness is in front of you — is not correct. If it were actually in front of you, you would see it. In that case, your visual awareness would have a location which you could point to easily.

“As you and I are seated in Prince Jetri’s Grove, we can see the Dharma hall, with trees and streams around it, and beyond them the River Ganges, and both the sun and the moon above us. Now, you and I, from here at the Lion’s Seat, could point to all these things: the shade cast by the trees, the shining sun, the walls that block our view, the trees themselves, the other plants, the space through which we see these things, some of them large, some as small as strands of hair — all are distinct from one another, but as long as they are visible, you can point to them. If your visual awareness were indeed in front of you, then as you point to these things you would be able to indicate which one of them is your awareness.

“Therefore, understand this: if your awareness were identical with space, how could space still be space? If your awareness were all these objects, how could they still be objects? Can you reveal, by means of a minute analysis of these many objects, the source that is the essential, pure, wondrously understanding awareness? Can you point it out to me in the same way that, with clarity and certainty, you can point out these objects?”

Ānanda said, “Looking from this many storied Dharma hall as far as the distant Ganges and as far as the sun and the moon, I can point out all the things that my eyes observe, and all of them are perceived objects. None is my visual awareness. World-Honored One, it is as the Buddha said. Neither I nor any other Arhat who is at the first stage and still has outflows, nor even a Bodhisattva, could analyze the myriad objects and show us a visual awareness with a nature of its own that is distinct from all the objects.”

The Buddha said, “So it is. So it is.”

The Buddha continued, saying to Ānanda, “It is as you said. Our visual awareness does not have a nature of its own that is distinct from the myriad things. Thus your awareness is not something you can point out. I will explain this to you again. As you and I are seated here looking at Prince Jetri’s Grove, let us look once more at the trees and garden and as far as the sun and moon. It is clear that not one of all the many different sights that you can point to is your visual awareness. But let us continue to explore this: are any of these things separate from your visual awareness?”

Ānanda said, “In fact, I do not think that anything I see, as I look around Prince Jetri’s Grove, is separate from my awareness. Why? If the trees were separate from my awareness, how could I be seeing them? But if the trees were identical to my awareness, how could they still be trees? The same is true of every other perceived object and of space as well. If space were separate from my awareness, how could I be seeing it? But if it were identical to my awareness, how could it still be space? Having reexamined this — having considered in detail the myriad sights around us, I realize that not even the smallest of them is separate from my awareness.”

The Buddha said, “So it is. So it is.”

The Buddha’s words stunned everyone in the assembly who still needed instruction. None of them had understood his meaning. Having lost what they had been relying on, they were distressed and fearful. The Thus-Come One took pity on them, knowing that their spirits were anxious and troubled, and he said in order to console Ānanda and the others in the great assembly, “Good people, the king of highest Dharma has been telling you the truth. He explains reality just as it is. He does not deceive or lie. What he has expounded for you is different from the four theories concerning what is everlasting propounded by Maskari Gośālīputra and the others. Consider this carefully; in earnestly seeking instruction, be worthy of my sympathy.”

Then Mañjuśrī, Prince of Dharma, taking pity on the four assemblies, stood up amidst the gathering. Having bowed at the Buddha’s feet, he put his palms together in respect and said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, the great assembly has not understood the two disclosures that the Thus-Come One has made: first, that the essence of our visual awareness and visible objects, and space as well, are identical; and, second, that they are not identical.

“World-Honored One, if our visual awareness were identical to the conditions before us — space and visible objects — then we should be able to point to our awareness just as we can point to visible objects and to space. But if our awareness were separate from visible objects and from space, we would not be able to observe them. People in the assembly are alarmed because they do not understand the basis of this argument; it is not that their roots in the Dharma from their previous lives are shallow. Therefore, I hope that the Thus-Come One will compassionately reveal exactly what the essence of visual awareness is, what the essence of observed objects is, and what it means to say that the essence of visual awareness is neither identical nor not identical to the objects we observe.”

The Buddha said to Mañjuśrī and to the rest of the great assembly, “To the Thus-Come Ones of the ten directions and to the Great Bodhisattvas who dwell in samādhi, visual awareness and visible objects, and objects of mind as well, are like elaborate mirages that appear in space. They have no real existence of their own. Fundamentally, visual awareness and all its conditioned objects are the pure, wondrously understanding enlightenment itself. In enlightenment, how could there be identity or a lack of it? Mañjuśrī, I now ask you: you are Mañjuśrī; is there a Mañjuśrī about whom one can say, ‘That is Mañjuśrī’? Or is there no such Mañjuśrī?”

“Neither, World-Honored One. I am simply Mañjuśrī. There is no one about whom one can say, ‘That is Mañjuśrī.’ Why? If there were, there would be two Mañjuśrīs. Nor is it the case that there is no such Mañjuśrī. In fact, neither the affirmation nor the denial of the statement ‘That is Mañjuśrī’ is true.”

The Buddha said, “The same is true of the wondrously understanding essence of our visual awareness and also of the objects we observe and of space. All are the wondrously understanding,

supreme enlightenment — the pure, perfect, true mind. It is a mistake to consider them as separate — as observed objects, space, and visual awareness — or as awareness of sound and the other kinds of awareness.

“Similarly, in the analogy of the second moon, which moon is the one about which one can say, ‘That is the moon,’ and which one is not in fact the moon? Actually, Mañjuśrī, there is really only one moon. We can neither affirm nor deny the statement, ‘That is the moon.’ Therefore, all your various interpretations of visual awareness and visible objects are nothing but delusion, and in the midst of delusion one cannot avoid thinking ‘That is’ and ‘That is not.’ Only from within the true, essential, wondrously understanding, awakened mind can one escape the error of trying to point to what ‘is’ and what ‘is not.’”

9

Visual awareness rises Neither on Its Own nor from Causes

“World-Honored One,” Ānanda said respectfully to the Buddha, “It truly is as the Dharma-King has said. Our enlightened nature can be involved with things throughout all ten directions, and yet it remains clear and still. It is eternally present. It neither comes into being nor ceases to be. “But how does what the Buddha has said in this regard differ from the ‘truth of the unmanifested nature’ as taught by the Brahmin Kapila, or from the ‘true self’ as taught by the ascetics who smear ashes on themselves, or by others who are not on the right path? Also, on Mount Lañkā the World-Honored One explained this principle to the Bodhisattva Mahāmati and to others, and he said then that those who are not on the right path are always speaking of things existing in and of themselves, whereas the Buddha speaks of something else: he speaks of causes and conditions. But as I see it now, the enlightened nature exists in and of itself; it neither comes into being nor ceases to be; it far transcends all that is distorted and unreal. It seems it does not arise from causes and conditions; instead it seems that it exists in and of itself. I only hope that the Buddha will explain this to us so that we may realize our true and genuine mind, which is our wondrously understanding, enlightened nature, and avoid all the wrong paths.”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “Just now, by various means I have explained this to you in order that the truth would be made clear to you. But you have not understood, and you mistakenly suppose that the enlightened nature exists in and of itself.

“Ānanda, if the enlightened nature indeed exists in and of itself, as you say, then you should be able to discern what it essentially consists of. Consider your wondrously understanding visual awareness: what about it exists in and of itself? Does it consist of light that exists in and of itself? Does it consist of darkness that exists in and of itself? Does it consist of space that exists in and of itself? Does it consist of solid objects that exist in and of themselves? If it consisted of light that existed in and of itself, Ānanda, you would not be able to see when it is dark. If it consisted of space that existed in and of itself, you would not be able to see solid objects. In the same way, if it consisted of darkness that existed in and of itself, the essential nature of your visual awareness would cease to exist, and so you would not be able to see when it is light.”

Ānanda said, “It must be then that the wondrously understanding nature of this visual awareness does not exist in and of itself after all. It now seems to me that it comes into being due to causes and conditions. But I do not understand this clearly yet. May I inquire of the Thus-Come One how this idea fits with the Buddha’s teachings about causes and conditions?”

The Buddha said, “You are saying that the luminous nature of visual awareness comes into being from causes and conditions. I ask you to consider, then: what is the primary cause of your being aware

of what you see before you? Is light the primary cause of your being aware of what you see before you? Is darkness the primary cause? Is space the primary cause? Are solid objects the primary cause?

“Ānanda, if light were the cause of your being aware of what you see before you, you could not see when it is dark. If darkness were the cause, you could not see when it is light. And what is true of light and darkness as causes is equally true of space and objects as causes.

“Moreover, Ānanda, is light or darkness a condition of your being aware of what you see before you? Are objects conditions? Is space a condition? If space were a condition of your being aware of what you see before you, Ānanda, then you could not see solid objects. If solid objects were a condition of your being aware of what you see before you, you would be unable to perceive space. And what is true of space and solid objects as conditions is equally true of light and darkness as conditions.

“Therefore, you should understand that the existence of the essential, wondrously understanding, enlightened visual awareness is not dependent for its existence on causes and conditions, nor does it exist in and of itself. Nevertheless, one cannot say that it does not exist in and of itself, nor can one say that it is independent of causes and conditions. Statements that account for its existence cannot be negated, yet one cannot say that they cannot be negated. Such statements cannot be affirmed, yet one cannot say that they cannot be affirmed. What is entirely beyond all defining attributes — that is the entirety of Dharma.

“In making all these distinctions, why have you resorted to terms used in the reckless fabrications of worldly discourse? You might as well try to seize a handful of space. However much you weary yourself in the attempt, space will forever elude your grasp.”

10
True Visual Awareness

Ānanda said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, if the wondrous enlightened nature is indeed not dependent on causes and conditions, why then has the Buddha often taught the monks that our visual awareness requires four conditions to be present: space, light, mind, and the eye-faculty. What did you mean then?”

The Buddha said, “Ānanda, what I have said about causes and conditions as they function in the world is not an ultimate truth. I have another question for you, Ānanda. When ordinary people say, ‘I see’ or ‘I do not see,’ what do they mean by ‘seeing’ and ‘not seeing’?”

Ānanda said, “Relying on the light of the sun, of the moon, or of lamps, ordinary people can see various objects. That is what they mean by ‘seeing.’ Without at least one of these three sources of light, they would not be able to see.”

“Ānanda, if people cannot see when light is absent, they would have no visual awareness of total darkness. Since they are visually aware of total darkness, you cannot say that they cannot see in the absence of light. Further, if their inability to see light when they are in total darkness indeed means they cannot see when it is dark, then conversely, their inability to see darkness when it is light must also mean that they cannot see when it is light, since the cases are parallel and both involve instances of not seeing.

“Light and darkness are mutually exclusive; still, regardless of which one is present, your visual awareness does not lapse for an instant. Therefore you should understand that in both cases there is seeing. How can you say that there is not?”

“You should understand then that when people see light, their awareness of it does not come into being because of the light. When people see darkness, their awareness of it does not come into being because of the darkness. When people see space, their awareness of it does not come into being because of the space, and when people see solid objects, their awareness of them does not come into being because of the solid objects.

“Now that we have arrived at the conclusion that visual awareness does not come into being because of any of these four, you should also understand that when you are able to use your true awareness to be aware of the essence of your visual awareness, you will know that your true awareness is not the same as the essence of your awareness. The two are quite separate from one another. The essence of awareness is not the equal of true awareness. How can you still be speaking of the attributes of causes and conditions and of things existing in and of themselves, or even coming into being from inhering or

combining? You Hearers of the Teaching are deficient in knowledge; your views are narrow and your attainment limited. Because you have not yet been able to break through to true reality in its purity, I will now instruct you further. Consider well what I say. Do not become weary and lose heart on the road to the wonder of full awakening.”

11

Distortions in Visual Awareness Based on Karma

Ānanda said to the Buddha, “The World-Honored One has elucidated the teaching concerning causes and conditions and concerning the existence of things in and of themselves, but we have not yet understood the teaching about inhering and conjoining and not inhering or conjoining. And now when we hear further that the essence of visual awareness of which the true awareness is aware is not the same as the true awareness, another layer has been added to our confusion and distress.

“It is my humble wish that, with his great kindness, the Buddha will open our Wisdom-eye and reveal the enlightened mind in all its purity.” With these words, he wept sorrowfully, bowed, and waited to receive the Sage’s instructions.

Then the World-Honored One took pity on Ānanda and on the others in the great assembly. He wished to make clear to them the wondrous path of practice that would lead them all to the samādhi of the Great Dhāraṇī. He said to Ānanda, “You have a keen memory, but it serves only to increase your erudition. You have not yet understood the practice of calming the mind from which subtle insight arises. Listen carefully as I give instruction point by point for your sake, and also for the sake of all in the future who have outflows, so that they may attain full awakening.

“All beings are bound to the cycle of saṃsāra, Ānanda, due to the false distinctions made by two kinds of distorted awareness. Wherever these two kinds of awarenesses arise, beings undergo the karma of the cycle. What are these two kinds of distorted awareness? The first is the distorted awareness based on the karma of individual beings; the second is the distorted awareness based on the karma beings share.

“What is the distorted awareness based on individual karma, Ānanda? Let us consider the example of a person with an eye disease. At night, when he looks at a lamp, it seems to him that circular bands of light surround the lamp with the entire spectrum of colors. What do you think? Are the circles of colored light that appear around the lamp at night an aspect of the lamplight or an aspect of his own visual awareness? If the circles of colored light were an aspect of the lamplight, Ānanda, wouldn’t they be seen by other people besides the person with the eye disease, instead of being visible only to him? On the other hand, if the circles of colored light were an aspect of the person’s visual awareness, wouldn’t his awareness itself be colored? If that were the case, what kind of thing would this colored awareness be?

“Further, Ānanda, if the circles of colored light were not an aspect of the lamplight, then when the

person with the diseased eyes glanced around him at a screen, a curtain, a table, or a sleeping mat, he would see the colored circles surrounding them as well. And if the circles of colored light were not an aspect of his visual awareness, he would not see the circles at all. Why then does he in fact see them?

“Therefore, you should know that, although the colors are in fact intrinsic to the lamplight, the illusory circles of colored light arise from the disease in his eyes. However, although the circles of colored light and his awareness of them are due to the disease, his awareness of the disease is not itself diseased. In short, you cannot say that the illusory circles of color are an aspect of the lamplight or an aspect of his visual awareness. But you also cannot say that they are not an aspect of the lamplight or of his visual awareness. In the same way, in the analogy of the two moons, the second moon is neither the real moon nor a reflection of the real moon. When pressure is applied to the eyeball, one sees two moons. Those who understand this will not argue that the second moon, which results from the pressure on the eye, is the real moon or that it is not the real moon, or, further, that it is an aspect of visual awareness or is not an aspect of visual awareness.

“The same is true of the illusory circles of light around the lamp: they arise from the disease in the eyes. Can you say now that they are an aspect only of the lamplight or only of visual awareness? You cannot. Even less can you distinguish them as neither an aspect of the lamplight nor an aspect of visual awareness.

“What is meant by the distorted awareness that is based on shared karma? Ānanda, in Jambudvīpa’s seas there are three thousand land masses. In their midst lies a great continent, and in that continent, from east to west, there are two thousand three hundred large countries. On the various islands in the ocean there may be two or three hundred countries, or in some cases only one or two countries, or as many as thirty, forty, or fifty.

“Suppose, Ānanda, that among them is an island where there are two countries only, and that the people of one of these countries share the experience of unfortunate circumstances. It may be that the people of that country see many inauspicious phenomena. They may see two suns or two moons, or rings or half-rings of white or colored light around the sun or the moon. They may see meteors or comets streaking down or across the sky, or else patterns of inauspicious energies in a bowed shape or in the shape of ears above or beside the sun, or bands of light reaching across the sky — many such inauspicious phenomena as these. Only the people of that one country see these phenomena; the people in the other country do not see them at all or even hear of them.

“Ānanda, I will now compare these situations in order to clarify them. First let us consider the distorted visual awareness based on beings’ individual karma. When the person with an eye disease sees the illusory circles of colored light around a lamp, the circles seem to him to be external objects, but in fact what the person sees is a consequence of the disease. The disease places a distorting strain on his visual awareness; it is not the colored light that places the strain. However, what is aware of the disease is not defective. In the same way, all that you can now see — the mountains, the rivers, the many lands, and the various forms of life — are the result of a disease that has existed in your visual awareness since time without beginning. The essence of visual awareness and what it is aware of cause what seem to be external phenomena to appear. Once we add another layer of understanding to our enlightenment, our awareness and what it is aware of become defective. While the awareness that is added to enlightenment is defective, however, the awareness that is the fundamental, enlightened, understanding awareness is not defective. That is, the true awareness that is aware of the defective awareness is not itself defective. That true awareness, which is aware of the essence of awareness, is not to be confused with the ordinary visual awareness, or the awareness of sounds, or any of the other types of awareness.

“To restate: your visual awareness of me now, and of yourself and of the ten classes of beings that can be seen in the world, is a defective awareness. It is not the awareness that is aware of the defect. The true nature of the essence of visual awareness is not defective, and therefore it is not what is ordinarily referred to as visual awareness.

“Ānanda, consider the distortion in visual awareness experienced by the people of that one country, in response to their shared karma. Compare it to the distorted visual awareness experienced by the person whose eyes are diseased, in response to his individual karma. The situations of the person with the eye disease and the people of that one country are similar, in that the illusory circles of colored light are a consequence of the eye disease, while the inauspicious phenomena seen by the people of that country are due to the miasmatic energies that arise from their shared karma. Both the individual karma and the shared karma have come into being because of distortions in awareness that have existed since time without beginning.

“Nevertheless, all the beings with outflows and all the lands in the ten directions, including the Saha world, with its four great seas and with the three thousand landmasses of Jambudvīpa, are fundamentally the enlightened, wondrous, luminous mind that understands and has no outflows. The conditions necessary for them all to arise are the illusory, diseased distortions in visual awareness, in awareness of sounds, and in all the other types of awareness. When these conditions are present in combination, the beings and lands come into being; when these conditions are not present, the beings and lands cease to be.

“When you remain entirely untouched by conditions, whether or not they are present in combination, you bring to an end all the causes of coming into being and ceasing to be. At that moment, you will awaken to perfect enlightenment, which is your true nature and which neither comes into being nor ceases to be. It is the pure, fundamental mind, the fundamental, everlasting enlightenment.”

Visual Awareness Exists Neither
Through Inhering Nor in Conjoining

“Ānanda, you have already understood that the wondrous, luminous, enlightened nature of your visual awareness does not arise from causes and conditions and that it does not come into being on its own. But you do not understand yet that the original, enlightened nature of your visual awareness also does not exist because of inhering or because of conjoining, nor because of a lack of inhering or a lack of conjoining.

“I will now ask you again, Ānanda, about the objects you perceive before you. Your deluded thinking about the world tells you that what causes these objects to exist is either inhering or conjoining. Therefore you wrongly suppose that what causes the enlightened mind to exist is either inhering or conjoining.

“Suppose the wondrous, pure nature of your visual awareness exists through inhering. Does it then exist through inhering in light? Does it exist through inhering in darkness? Does it exist through inhering in space? Does it exist through inhering in solid objects? If it exists through inhering in light, then when you see in the presence of light, precisely where in the light does it inhere? Visual awareness and light each have their own distinct qualities, so if visual awareness were inherent in light, what qualities would each of them have then? Either they would have the ability to see, in which case you would be seeing your own awareness, or they would not have the ability to see, in which case you would not be able to see light. In any case, how can light be inherent in your visual awareness, since the enlightened nature of your visual awareness is in fact already complete in itself? Likewise, since light is already complete in itself, how could your visual awareness have been inherent in light? Again, since your visual awareness is different from light, it would cease to be itself if it were to inhere in light, and light would likewise cease to be what we call light if it inhered in visual awareness; each would lose its nature. In short, it cannot be right to say your visual awareness exists through inhering in light. Nor can it be right to say your visual awareness exists through inhering in darkness, in space, or in objects.

“Once again, Ānanda, does the wondrous, pure nature of your visual awareness exist through conjoining with light? Does it exist through conjoining with darkness? Does it exist through conjoining with space? Does it exist through conjoining with objects?

“If your visual awareness existed in conjoining with light, then in total darkness, when no light is

present, you would not be aware of the darkness since your awareness would be conjoined with light rather than with darkness. If, even so, you could see darkness without your awareness being conjoined to darkness, it follows that you would not see light when your awareness was conjoined to light. And if you could not see light when your awareness had been conjoined to it, then since you could not see light, how would you know when it was light or dark? The same arguments could be made to show that your visual awareness does not exist through conjoining with darkness, with space, or with objects.”

Ānanda said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, I am now thinking that the wondrous, fundamental, enlightened nature of our visual awareness does not exist either through inhering in or through conjoining with the objects before us or with our processes of perceiving of them.”

The Buddha said, “Now you are saying that your enlightened awareness does not exist either through inhering or through conjoining. I will continue to question you, then. If the wondrous, essential nature of your visual awareness does not inhere in or conjoin with anything, then are you saying that it does not inhere in light? That it does not inhere in darkness? That it does not inhere in space? That it does not inhere in solid objects?

“If it did not inhere in light, then a boundary would necessarily exist between your visual awareness and the light. Look carefully now: where is your awareness? Where is the light? And where is the boundary between them? If, Ānanda, your visual awareness were nowhere within the confines of light, it would follow that your awareness and the light had not come into contact, and so you would not be able to see where the light is. Then how could a boundary exist between them? The same can be said of the notion that your visual awareness does not inhere in darkness, in space, or in solid objects.

“Moreover, if the wondrous, essential nature of your visual awareness did not become conjoined to anything, then does it not become conjoined to light? Does it not become conjoined to darkness? Does it not become conjoined to space? Does it not become conjoined to objects?”

“If your visual awareness did not become conjoined to light, then light and your awareness would be entirely incompatible, just as light and your awareness of sounds are incompatible. They would never come into contact. Further, since you would not be able to see where the light is, how could you know whether or not your awareness had become conjoined to it? The same would be true of your visual awareness not becoming conjoined to darkness, to space, or to solid objects.”