

V
Instructions
for Practice

1
Five Layers of Turbidity

Once again Ānanda wept as he bowed at the Buddha's feet. Then he knelt, and with his palms joined he said respectfully to the Buddha, "The Supreme, Compassionate, Pure, and Noble King has skillfully opened our minds. In response to our various situations and circumstances, he has been able to urge us on and to pull us benighted ones out of the sea of suffering in which we have been drowning.

"World-Honored One, now that I have heard the Buddha explain this Dharma, I know that the Matrix of the Thus-Come One, which is the wondrous, enlightened mind that understands, extends throughout all ten directions. I know that it encompasses and supports the lands of the Thus-Come Ones in all ten directions — those pure and splendid lands of the Wondrous, Enlightened Kings. However, the Thus-Come One has also admonished me for merely listening to the Dharma without applying it to my practice. Now, therefore, I am like a wanderer who unexpectedly meets a celestial king. The king bestows upon the wanderer a magnificent house. The house is now his, yet in order to go in he will still need to find a door. I only hope that the Thus-Come One will not withhold his compassion from all of us in this assembly who are covered in darkness, so that we may renounce the Lesser Vehicle. May he show us the road that leads from our original resolve to the Thus-Come Ones' bodiless nirvana. May he enable those of us who still need instruction to subdue our age-old habit of dependence on the objects of the senses, to master the dhāraṇī, and to gain the wisdom and vision of the Buddhas." Having made this request, Ānanda bowed to the ground, and all in the assembly single-mindedly awaited the Buddha's compassionate instruction.

Then the World-Honored One took pity on all the Hearers of the Teaching and on the Solitary Sages in the assembly who did not yet abide effortlessly in the fully awakened mind. He took pity also on the beings who would be born after the Buddha's bodiless nirvana, during the time of the Dharma's ending. He revealed the wondrous path of practice in accord with the Supreme Vehicle, so that all would resolve their minds upon becoming fully awake.

He instructed Ānanda and the others in the assembly as follows: "You have all made a firm resolve to become enlightened, and you have not wearied of your practice of the samādhi of the Buddhas, the Thus-Come Ones. Therefore, you should now understand two definitive principles concerning your resolve to become enlightened. What are these two definitive principles? The first of the two, Ānanda, is that all of you who wish to renounce the Lesser Vehicle of the Hearers of the Teaching and to practice in accord with the Vehicle of the Bodhisattvas so that you can gain the wisdom and vision of the Buddhas, must examine the resolve that is the basis of your practice that leads to enlightenment. Is this resolve identical to the awakening that will be the result of your practice, or is it not?

"If the mind that comes into being and ceases is the basis of your practice, Ānanda, then you will not be able to ride the Buddha's Vehicle to where there is nothing that comes into being or ceases to be. For this reason, you should shine the light of your understanding on the phenomena of the material world. Since all phenomena are subject to change and decay, how could any of them serve as a basis for the practice of Dharma? Contemplate the phenomena of the world, Ānanda: which one of them does not decay? But you will never hear of space decaying. Why? Space is unconditioned, and so it has never been and can never be subject to dissolution.

"In your own body, what appears as solid is composed of the primary element earth, what is moist contains the primary element water, what has warmth belongs to the primary element fire, and movement constitutes the primary element wind. Because these four primary elements are bound together, your pure, perfect, wondrous enlightened mind that understands is divided into the functions of seeing, listening, touching, and cognition. Turbidity, in five layers, comes about as a result.

"What is turbidity, Ānanda? Let us consider an example. Water in its original state is pure and clear,

while soil, ashes, and sand in their original states are solid and opaque. These defining attributes of water and of soil, ashes, and sand are such that they are mutually incompatible. Suppose that someone were to pick up some soil and throw it into clear water. The soil now loses its solidity, and the water loses its purity. Together they appear clouded or, we may say, turbid. The five layers of turbidity occur in the same way.

“As you look into space throughout all ten directions, Ānanda, no separation can be made between space and your visual awareness of it. If only space existed, then there would be nothing to be aware of it. If only awareness existed, then there would not be anything for it to be aware of. Therefore space and visual awareness become entangled with each other. With this entanglement, based on delusion, the turbidity of time comes into being. This is the first layer of turbidity.

“Your body is composed of the four primary elements. Your visual awareness, your hearing, your tactile awareness, and your mental aware-ness become strictly defined, while water, fire, wind, and earth participate in bringing about the attributes of the faculties that have awareness. Thus awareness and the primary elements become entangled with each other. With this entanglement, based on delusion, the turbidity of perception comes into being. This is the second layer of turbidity.

“Further, your mind is habituated to recollecting the past, to being aware of the present, and to anticipating the future. Because of these habits, the six consciousnesses arise and embrace the six kinds of perceived objects. Without these objects, your mind-consciousness has no attributes, and without your perception of them, these objects have no identity. Objects you perceive and your mind-consciousness become entangled with each other. With this entanglement, based on delusion, the mind becomes turbid with afflictions. These afflictions are the third layer of turbidity.

“Further, by night and by day, beings ceaselessly come into being and perish. They always desire to continue to experience the world indefinitely through their faculties of perception. Their karma leads them to continually move from one land to another. Their thoughts and their karma become entangled with each other, and with this entanglement, based on delusion, there is the fourth layer, the turbidity of individual beings.

“The fundamental natures of your seeing, your hearing, and your other awarenesses do not differ from one another, but the six objects of perception separate them so that your awareness is forced to become differentiated. Although the six sense-consciousnesses share a single fundamental awareness, their functioning has become distinct. The consciousnesses and their objects are no longer in their correct relationship. They become entangled with each other, and with this entanglement, based on delusion, there is the fifth layer, the turbidity of lifespans.

“Ānanda, now you wish to transform your visual, aural, tactile, and mental awareness, together with the other kinds of awareness, into the permanence, bliss, true self, and purity of the Thus-Come One. To accomplish this, you must pull out the root of death and rebirth and rely on that pure and perfect nature that neither comes into being nor ceases to be. Use the purity of your true nature to make disappear the distinction between your original state of enlightenment and the illusory state of what comes into being and ceases to be. The original enlightened understanding, which neither comes into being nor ceases to be, must be the basis of your practice. Then you will attain the awakening that will be the result of your practice.

“The process may be compared to the settling of turbid water. If you keep it undisturbed in a container so that it is completely still and quiet the sand and silt in it will settle naturally, and the water will become clear. This may be compared to the initial stage of subduing the afflictions that arise from transitory perceptions of objects. When the sand and silt have been removed so that only clear water remains, then fundamental ignorance has been eliminated forever. When the water is quite pure and clear, nothing that may happen will be a cause of affliction. All will be in accord with the pure and wondrous attributes of nirvana.”

2
Choosing One Faculty
in Order to Liberate All Six

“The second principle is that, if you are resolved to become fully awakened, you must courageously dedicate yourself to practice in accord with the Bodhisattva Vehicle. You must decisively let go of everything that has conditioned attributes. Carefully examine the source of your afflictions, which since time without beginning have created your karma and nurtured its growth. Who is it that creates this karma and undergoes retribution? If, during your quest for full awakening, Ānanda, you do not examine and contemplate the sources of affliction, you will not be able to understand the illusory and distorted nature of the perceiving faculties and their objects. At what point did you become so disoriented? If you do not know that, how can you expect to subdue your afflictions and aspire to becoming a Buddha?

“Ānanda, consider some worldly person who wishes to untie a knot. If he cannot see the knot, how will he know how to untie it? You have never heard of space being broken into parts. Why? Space has no shape or form. Therefore, it can neither be divided nor put together again.

“But now your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind are like conspirators who have introduced thieves into your house to plunder your valuables. In this way, since time without beginning, beings and the world of time and space have been tied to each other because of illusion, and that is why beings cannot transcend this world.

“What do I mean, Ānanda, by ‘beings and the world of time and space’? ‘Time’ denotes flux and change; ‘space’ denotes location and direction. You already know that the directions are north, south, east, west, north-east, southeast, northwest, southwest, above, and below, while time is divided into past, present, and future. Thus locations are tenfold and the flow of time is threefold, making ten directions and three periods of time. Because beings are entangled in illusion, they constantly move about in time and space, which become interconnected.

“Although space can be defined as extending in ten directions and can be clearly understood as such, people in general only take account of north, south, east, and west. They do not consider above and below to be specific directions, and they see the four intermediate directions as merely relative to the others, while the four cardinal points are understood to be fixed. Therefore, we can say that space is fourfold and time threefold, and that the three times and four directions multiplied together make a total of twelve.

“Again, if we multiply these numbers in three stages; first, by each other, to make twelve, next by ten and then again by ten, we reach a total of twelve hundred. Applying this to the six faculties of perception, we may measure the efficacy of each, with a total of twelve hundred signifying the greatest possible efficacy.

“Ānanda, you can now determine the degree of efficacy of each of the faculties of perception. Consider the efficacy of the eye-faculty. You can see in front of you but not behind you. In front of you there is light, but behind you there is darkness. Adding in your partial vision at your left and right, your capacity to see is effective by only two thirds. The over-all efficacy of the eye-faculty, then, is incomplete, in that it functions in three directions but not in the fourth. Know then that the efficacy of the eye-faculty may be expressed as eight hundred.

“Consider the ability of the ear-faculty to hear in all ten directions without exception. The sounds we hear may be distant or nearby. When there is silence, our hearing is unbounded. Know then that the efficacy of the ear-faculty may be expressed as twelve hundred.

“Consider the ability of the nose-faculty to smell. The breath moves through the nose in and out. But in the space between inhaling and exhaling, the breath is lacking. Upon examination, we can say

that the nose-faculty is lacking one of three aspects. Know then that the efficacy of the nose-faculty may be expressed as eight hundred.

“Consider the ability of the tongue-faculty to proclaim wisely both worldly and world-transcending wisdom. Languages differ from place to place, but meanings know no boundary. Know then that the efficacy of the tongue-faculty may be expressed as twelve hundred.

“Consider the ability of the body-faculty to be aware of contact. It is conscious of pleasure and discomfort. It has awareness upon contact and lacks awareness once there is separation. Separation is a single quality, while contact is twofold. Upon examination, then, we may say that the body-faculty is lacking in one of three aspects. Know then that the efficacy of the body-faculty may be expressed as eight hundred.

“Consider the ability of the cognitive faculty to silently include within its scope all worldly and world-transcending phenomena in all ten directions and all three periods of time. It excludes neither the thoughts of sages nor the distorted thoughts of ordinary beings; it knows no boundary. Know then that the efficacy of the cognitive faculty may be expressed as twelve hundred.

“Ānanda, you now wish to go upstream against the current of the river of desire, which leads to death and rebirth. You wish to go against the current that flows through the faculties until you reach the source, where there is neither coming into being nor ceasing to be. You should investigate how the six faculties function: which ones function upon contact with their objects and which ones function while apart from their objects; which are the more easily employed in the practice of reversing your attention and which ones are less easily employed; which ones are best suited for breaking through to enlightenment and which ones are not fully efficacious. If you can discern which of your faculties can lead you to break through to enlightenment, then you will be able to go up-stream against the current that carries the karma in which, due to your delusion, you have been immersed since time without beginning. One day of practice that relies on a fully effective faculty is equivalent to an eon of practice that relies on a faculty that is not fully effective. I have already given you a full explanation of the fundamental purity and perfect clarity of the six faculties, and I have now given numerical equivalents for the efficacy of each one. It is up to you to choose carefully which one to concentrate on. I will clarify this to help you move forward vigorously.

“The Thus-Come Ones in all ten directions chose one of the eighteen constituent elements of perception for their practice that led to their gaining the perfect, supreme, complete awakening. For them, none of the eighteen constituents was superior or inferior. But because you are at a lower level and have not yet fully developed that wisdom which is independent of conditions, I have explained all this to you in detail so that you will be able to choose one faculty as a gateway to deep practice. If you take that path until you have left behind all distortion within that one faculty, then all the other faculties will be purified as well.”

Ānanda said respectfully to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, how can I choose one gateway that will allow me to reverse my outflows and purify all six of my faculties of perception at the same time?”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “You have already reached the level of one who has entered the stream of the sages, and you have abandoned the deluded views held by beings in the three realms of existence. But you still do not understand the illusory habits which you have accumulated in life after life since time without beginning. You will need to practice even more to get rid of the subtle aspects of your habits as they come into being, abide, decay, and perish.

“Now you should consider whether the six faculties are one or six. If they are one, Ānanda, why can’t the ears see, and why can’t the eyes hear? Why can’t the head walk? Why can’t the feet speak? If the six faculties are indeed six, which one of them is now receiving my instruction in this subtle, wondrous gateway to the Dharma as I explain it to this assembly?”

Ānanda replied, “I am hearing it with my ears.”

The Buddha said, “If it is just your ears that hear it, do they then have no connection to your body or your mouth? And yet you ask about the teaching with your mouth, and as you receive it, you show

your respect with your body. Therefore — as to the idea that the faculties must be one if they are not six, and that they must be six if they are not one — we cannot say that fundamentally they are both one and six, nor can we say that they are neither one nor six. In your disoriented state, in which you have been sinking and undergoing change since time without beginning, you have conceived the idea that there is “one” and “six” within the fundamental perfect clarity. As a sage at the first level, you have purified the six, but you have not done away with the one.

“By analogy, suppose one were to try to fit some space into a variety of containers. Because containers differ in shape, we could say the spaces within them also differ in shape. If you take away the containers and look at the space that was within them, you will say that the space has become one again. But how could space become unified or separated because of what you have done? Indeed, how could the space be said to be either one or not one? You should understand that the same is true of the six faculties of perception.

“The essence of seeing is generated out of the wondrous perfection of the pure mind because it adheres to the appearance of the two attributes of light and darkness. That essence of seeing then reveals the essence of visible objects, and the two then become entangled with one another, thus creating the essence of the eye-faculty. The essence of the eye-faculty is composed of the four primary elements in their pure state, and that is why it may be called the faculty’s ‘essence.’ The physical eye takes the shape of a grape and is composed of the four primary elements in their coarse state. The eye-faculty recklessly races outward in pursuit of visible objects.

“The essence of hearing is generated out of the wondrous perfection

of the pure mind because it adheres to the two opposing attributes of sound and silence. That essence of hearing then gathers into itself the essence of sound, and the two then become entangled with one another, thus creating the essence of the ear-faculty. The essence of the ear-faculty is composed of the four primary elements in their pure state, and that is why it may be called the faculty’s ‘essence.’ The physical ear takes the shape of a curled new leaf and is composed of the four primary elements in their coarse state. The ear-faculty recklessly races outward in pursuit of sounds.

“The essence of smelling is generated out of the wondrous perfection of the pure mind because it adheres to the two contrasting attributes of openness and blockage. The essence of smelling takes in the essence of odor, and the two then become entangled with one another, thus creating the essence of the nose-faculty. The essence of the nose-faculty is composed of the four primary elements in their pure state, and that is why it may be called the faculty’s ‘essence.’ The physical nose takes the shape of a pair of talons and is composed of the four primary elements in their coarse state. The nose-faculty recklessly races outward in pursuit of odors.

“The essence of tasting is generated out of the wondrous perfection of the pure mind because it adheres to the two interacting attributes of flavor and lack of flavor. The essence of tasting mixes itself with the essence of flavor, thus creating the essence of the tongue-faculty. The essence of the tongue-faculty is composed of the four primary elements in their pure state, and that is why it may be called the faculty’s ‘essence.’ The physical tongue takes the shape of a crescent moon and is composed of the four primary elements in their coarse state. The tongue-faculty recklessly races outward in pursuit of flavors.

“The essence of the sense of touch is generated out of the wondrous perfection of the pure mind because it adheres to the two interacting attributes of contact and separation. The essence of tactile awareness seizes upon the essence of what is touched, thus creating the essence of the body-faculty. The essence of the body-faculty is composed of the four primary elements in their pure state, and that is why it may be called

the faculty’s ‘essence.’ The physical body, with its torso which takes the shape of a skin-covered drum, is composed of the four primary elements in their coarse form. The body-faculty recklessly races

outward in pursuit of tangible objects.

“The essence of cognition is generated out of the wondrous perfection of the pure mind because it adheres to the two mutually perpetuating attributes of coming into being and perishing. The essence of mental awareness grasps the essence of objects of cognition, thus creating the essence of the cognitive faculty. The essence of the cognitive faculty is composed of the four primary elements in their pure state, and that is why it may be called the faculty’s ‘essence.’ The cognitive faculty, which is, as it were, seen in a dark room, responds to the four primary elements in their coarse form. The mind-faculty recklessly flows outward in pursuit of mental objects.

“So it is, Ānanda, that the six faculties come into being out of the awakened mind when another understanding is added to that awakened mind. As a result, the essential understanding is lost and the faculties adhere to what is distorted, and each one assumes a different function. Therefore, if you were now to be deprived of both light and darkness, would your seeing continue to exist or would it not? If you were deprived of both sound and silence, would your hearing lose its fundamental characteristics or would it not? If you were deprived of both openness and blockage, would your capacity to smell continue to exist or would it not? If you were deprived of both the presence and the absence of flavors, would your capacity to taste continue to exist or would it not? If you were deprived of both contact and separation, would your sense of touch still exist or would it not? If you were deprived of both the coming into being and perishing of the objects of cognition, would your capacity for cognition still exist or would it not?

“All that you need to do is not allow your attention to be diverted by the twelve conditioned attributes of sound and silence, contact and separation, flavor and the absence of flavor, openness and blockage, coming into being and perishing, and light and darkness. Next, extricate one faculty by detaching it from its objects, and redirect that faculty inward

so that it can return to what is original and true. Then it will radiate the light of the original understanding. This brilliant light will shine forth and extricate the other five faculties until they are completely free.

“If your six faculties are freed from the objects that they perceive so that the light of your understanding is not diverted into one or another of the faculties, then the light of your understanding will manifest through all the faculties so that all six of them will function interchangeably.

“Ānanda, you know, do you not, that here in this assembly, Aniruddha is blind and yet can see; that the dragon Upananda is deaf and yet can hear; that the goddess of the River Ganges has no sense of smell and yet can discern fragrances; that Gavāṃpati’s malformed tongue cannot taste, and yet he is aware of flavors; and that the spirit Sūnyatā is incorporeal but just now has a sense of touch — you can see him here temporarily as he is illumined by the light of the Thus-Come One. By nature, however, he is as bodiless as the wind. And like all who abide in the samādhi of cessation and who have attained the stillness of the Hearers of the Teaching, Mahākāśyapa, here in this assembly, long ago caused his cognitive faculty to cease, and yet without relying on the thinking mind, his understanding is clear and perfect.

“Once all your faculties are completely disengaged, Ānanda, a pure

brilliance will shine forth from within them. Then all coarse perceived objects — indeed all phenomena subject to change in the material world — will be transformed, just as ice is transformed when it melts in hot water. Then, responding in the time it takes for a single thought to arise, all phenomena will merge into your supreme awareness.

“Ānanda, consider someone who, seeing only with his eyes, quickly closes his eyes so that total darkness surrounds him. His six faculties will be enveloped in the darkness such that his eyes will not be able to distinguish the head from the feet on someone else's body. But he will be able to tell the

head and the foot apart if he traces their shape with his hands. He will be able to identify them as accurately as he would have done by using his eyes.

“Now, if his visual awareness were dependent on the presence of light, he would have no visual awareness when he was immersed in darkness. But without light, he can still perceive. Total darkness need not prevent him from being aware of distinctions among objects. In the same way, once your faculties and their objects have melted away, how could your awareness and understanding not become perfect and wondrous?”

The Example of the Bell's Sound

Ānanda said respectfully to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, as the Buddha has said, when one’s practice is based on the resolve to seek what is everlasting, one’s mind should be correlated to the mental state of the enlightenment that will be the result of one’s practice. This result, World-Honored One, may be called Full Awakening, Nirvana, the Suchness of Reality, the Buddha-nature, the Pure Consciousness, the Emptiness of the Matrix of the Thus-Come One, and the Wisdom of the Great Perfect Mirror. Those are seven different names for what is pure and perfect, everlasting and indestructible, that essential nature which is like the most durable vajra.

“If, ultimately, seeing, hearing, and the other sense-consciousnesses do not exist on their own apart from light and darkness, sound and silence, openness and blockage, and so forth, then in the same way the mind-consciousness must cease to exist when it is apart from its own objects. How then can these consciousnesses, which will ultimately perish, be the basis for practice as one strives for the Thus-Come Ones’ everlasting realization as it is characterized by those seven names?

“World-Honored One, suppose that in the final analysis no seeing can take place when neither light nor darkness are present. In the same way, no thought-processes can take place if no objects are being presented to the faculty of cognition. Then no matter how much I look here and look there, going about in circles in an exhaustive search, I can find nothing that fundamentally is my mind or my mind’s objects. On what then can I base my quest for supreme enlightenment?

“What the Thus-Come One has just said contradicts his previous words about what is clear, pure, perfect, and everlasting. It seems to be mere speculation. How can these words spoken by the Thus-Come One be true?

I only hope the Buddha, out of his great kindness, will set me free from the doubts that I am clinging to.”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “You are very learned, but you have not yet put an end to your outflows. You know the reasons for delusion, but when you encounter delusion you fail to recognize it. It is to be feared that, though you are sincere, you still do not quite trust the teaching. I will have to make use of another everyday situation to dispel your doubts.”

The Buddha then instructed Rāhula to strike the bell once, and he asked Ānanda, “Do you hear?”

Ānanda and the others in the assembly answered, “We hear.”

When the bell had ceased ringing, the Buddha asked again, “Now do you hear?”

Ānanda and the others in the assembly answered, “We do not.”

Then Rāhula struck the bell once more, and the Buddha asked once again, “Now do you hear?”

Ānanda and the others again replied, “We hear.”

The Buddha asked Ānanda, “How is it that you heard and then did not hear?”

Ānanda and the others said respectfully to the Buddha, “We heard the bell when it was struck, but when at length the sounding of the bell had died away and its reverberations had faded, we no longer were hearing.”

The Buddha then instructed Rāhula to strike the bell yet again, and he asked Ānanda, “Is there a sound now?”

Ānanda and the others in the assembly answered, “Yes, there is a sound.”

In a little while the sound faded, and the Buddha asked, “And now is there a sound?”

Ānanda and the others replied, “There is no sound.”

After a moment Rāhula again struck the bell, and the Buddha asked again, “And is there a sound now?”

Ānanda and the others said, “There is.”

The Buddha asked Ānanda, “How is it that there was a sound and then no sound?”

Ānanda and the others in the assembly answered respectfully, “When the bell was struck, there was a sound, but when at length the sounding of the bell had died away and the reverberations had faded, there was no longer any sound.”

The Buddha said to Ānanda and the others in the assembly. “Why have you given such muddled answers?”

Ānanda and the others thereupon asked the Buddha, “Why do you say that our answers were muddled?”

The Buddha replied, “When I asked you whether you heard, you said that you had heard. When I asked if there was a sound, you said that there was a sound. Since you did not clearly distinguish between hearing and sound in your answer, how could I not say that your answer was muddled?”

“Ānanda, once the sounding of the bell and its reverberations had faded, you said that you no longer heard. If it were true that you had stopped hearing, your essential capacity for hearing would have ceased to exist. It would be like a dead tree that is unable to grow again, in that you would have been unable to hear the bell if it were struck again. You knew when the bell’s sound, which is a perceived object, was present and when it was absent. But how could it be that your essential capacity for hearing was present and then absent? If your essential capacity for hearing were in truth no longer present, what then would be aware that the sound had ceased? Therefore, Ānanda, although the sounds you hear come into being and cease to be, neither the presence nor the subsequent absence of sound can cause your essential capacity for hearing to come into being and then cease to be.

“You are still deluded. In your confusion you take hearing and the presence of sound to be the same thing. You consider something ever-lasting to be something that will come to an end. In the final analysis, it cannot be said that hearing in its essential nature is dependent on the presence of sound or silence, or dependent on whether the ears are obstructed or unobstructed.

“Consider someone who has fallen deeply asleep on his bed. While he is sleeping, someone in his household starts beating clothes or pounding rice. The dreamer hears the sounds of the beating or the pounding and mistakes them for something else, perhaps the striking of a drum or the ringing of a bell. In his dream he wonders why the striking of the bell or drum sounds like clothes being beaten or like rice being pounded. He wakes up suddenly, and he immediately recognizes the sound of the pounding. He tells the people in his household, ‘I just had a dream in which I mistook your pounding rice for the beating of a drum.’

“Ānanda, how was it that this dreamer could have been conscious of sound or silence? How was it that his ears were unobstructed and functioning? Although his body was asleep, the enlightened nature of his hearing did not sleep. Even when the body wastes away, its energy dissipates, and its life force moves on, how could that essential capacity to hear dissipate along with them?

“Nevertheless, since beings have allowed their attention to be drawn to sights and sounds and have allowed themselves to be carried along in their streams of thought, as it has been since time without beginning, they have not yet awakened and do not yet understand the purity, the wondrousness, and the permanence of their own essential nature. Instead of attending to what is everlasting, they attend to what comes into being and perishes, and as a result, in life after life, they are mired in impurity and are bound to the cycle of death and rebirth. But if they turn away from what comes into being and perishes and hold fast to what is true and everlasting, then the light of the everlasting will appear, and as a result the faculties, their objects, and the sense-consciousnesses will fade away and disappear.

“By entirely disengaging yourself from two impurities — defiled mental processes and defiled

emotional attachment to those processes — your Dharma-eye will become clear and bright. How then could you fail to go on to realize a supreme understanding and awakening?”

Ānanda said respectfully to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, the Thus-Come One has now explained the second of the unalterable principles. But let us consider an example from ordinary life. Someone trying to untie a knot must understand how the knot was tied in the first place. I believe that otherwise he will not be able to untie it. World-Honored One, we Arhats in the assembly who still need instruction may be compared to the person who is trying to untie a knot. Since time without beginning we have been born into ignorance and have perished in ignorance. Although we are learned and have strong roots in the Dharma, and although we have entered the monastic life and call ourselves monks, it is as if we were subject to a fever that recurs every other day. I only hope that the greatly compassionate one will be moved to deeply pity us who are drowning in the sea of afflictions. How are the knots of our bodies and minds tied, and where do we begin to untie them, so that we and the suffering beings of the future may be freed from the cycle of death and rebirth and fall no longer into the three realms of conditioned existence?”

Having spoken these words, he bowed to the ground, as did all the others in the assembly. He shed tears as he eagerly awaited the sublime instructions given by the Buddha, the World-Honored One.

Then the World-Honored One took pity on Ānanda and on all the others in the assembly who still needed instruction, wishing that, for the sake of the future, they might transcend the conditioned world and become guides for the time yet to come. As he circled his hand over the crown of Ānanda’s head, his hand shone with light that was the color of the purple-tinted gold of the River Jambu. Then throughout all ten directions, every world in which Buddhas were dwelling quaked in six ways. Each one of the numberless Thus-Come Ones of those worlds emitted resplendent light from the crown of his head. Those beams of light shone down upon the crown of the Thus-Come One’s head as he was seated in Jetri’s Grove. No one in the assembly had witnessed such an event before.

Then Ānanda and all the others in the great assembly heard the numberless Thus-Come Ones from throughout the ten directions speak in one voice, though with different tongues, saying: “Well done, Ānanda! You want to understand the ignorance that you were born with. The source of the knot — what causes you to be bound to the cycle of death and re-birth — is your six faculties of perception, nothing more. Also, since you wish to understand the supreme enlightenment, you should understand that it is through those same six faculties that you can quickly gain bliss, liberation, and stillness, wondrous and everlasting.”

Though Ānanda heard these words of Dharma, he did not understand them. He bowed his head and said respectfully to the Buddha, “How can it be that nothing more than the six faculties binds us to the cycle of death and rebirth while at the same time they cause us to gain wondrous and everlasting bliss?”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “The faculties and their objects come from the same source. What binds and what unbinds are one and the same. The consciousnesses are by nature illusory, like flowers seen in the sky. In response to objects, Ānanda, there is perception, and in response to the faculties there are objects. Neither the objects nor perceptions of them have an essential nature; they are dependent on each other, like intertwining reeds. Know, therefore, that the establishment of perceived objects such that they exist separately within your awareness is the foundation of ignorance. When objects are not perceived as separate from awareness, that itself is nirvana, which is the true purity, free of outflows. Why would you allow anything else to be added to it?”

Then the World-Honored One, wishing to restate these principles, spoke these verses:

“In our true nature, all conditioned things are seen as empty;
That which arises from conditions is illusory.
That which is unconditioned is not born, nor does it perish;
It too has no reality, like flowers in the sky.

“Though we use words to try to speak the truth, all words are false,
Not only words that aim at truth, but false words — all are false.
Both that which is called ‘true’ and that which is called ‘false’ are false,
How can there be, therefore, observer and what is observed?

“In the perceiver and perceived, there’s nothing that is real;
They are like vines that only stand by twisting round each other.
Entanglement and liberation share a common basis;
The Path of Sages and of common folk is one path only.

“You should consider now these vines that twist around each other.
The vines have no existence, yet they do not lack existence.
The darkness of confusion is our basic ignorance;
The light of understanding brings about our liberation.

“A knot must be untied according to a certain sequence,
And when the six have been untied, the one will vanish too.
Choose one perceiving faculty and realize your breakthrough.
Enter the current. Realize the true enlightenment.

“From subtle ādāna, the storehouse-consciousness,
The energy of habits can burst forth into a torrent.
Lest you confuse the true with what’s untrue,
I rarely speak of this.

“But when your mind grasps hold of your own mind, what’s not illusion
Then becomes illusory. And if you don’t grasp hold,
Then what is called “illusion” and “what’s not illusion” too
Will not arise. How could what is illusion be established?

“This Dharma may be called the wondrous lotus-flower,
The royal, indestructible, magnificent awakening.
This practice of samāpatti, though likened to illusion,
Can quickly bring you past the ones who need no further training.

“This peerless Dharma is the road that all World-Honored Ones
Have walked to reach the gateway to nirvana.”

When they had heard this supreme, compassionate instruction which the Buddha, the Thus-Come One, had spoken in this combination of instructional and reiterative verses, with their luminous and wondrous truths, lucid and incisive, Ānanda and the others in the great assembly all rejoiced, and their mind’s eye opened to an understanding that was entirely new to them.

The Analogy of the Six Knots

Ānanda put his palms together, bowed to the ground, and said respect-fully to the Buddha, “I have heard the Buddha, out of his unbounded compassion, speak these true words of Dharma concerning the purity, wondrousness, and everlastingness of our real nature. But I still do not fully understand the sequence for releasing the knots such that ‘when the six are untied, the one will vanish.’ I only hope that the Buddha will show us great kindness and that, taking pity once again on this assembly and on beings of the future, he will bestow upon us words of Dharma that will cleanse us of impurities.”

The Thus-Come One straightened his inner garment and arranged his robe. Still sitting in the Lion’s Seat, he reached out onto the table in front of him, which was inlaid with seven kinds of precious things. He picked up an elegant presentation scarf which had been given to him by a god from the Heaven of Self-Restraint. Before the assembly he tied a knot in the scarf, and showing it to Ānanda, he said, “What is this?”

Ānanda and the others respectfully answered, “It is a knot.”

The Thus Come One thereupon tied another knot in his elegantly patterned scarf and again asked Ānanda, “And what is this?”

Ānanda and the others in the assembly again respectfully answered, “It is another knot.”

The Buddha tied a sequence of similar knots in his elegantly patterned scarf until six knots had been tied on top of one other. Each time, as he held up the knot he had just tied, he asked Ānanda, “And what is this?”

Each time Ānanda and the others in the great assembly replied in the same manner: “It is another knot.”

The Buddha then said to Ānanda, “The first time that I tied a knot in this elegantly patterned scarf, you said that it was a knot. To begin with, this precious scarf was in fact merely a scarf. Why did you answer a second and a third time, ‘It is another knot’?”

Ānanda said respectfully to the Buddha, “Basically, World-Honored One, this precious, elegantly patterned, and beautifully woven scarf is a single thing, but it seems to me that when the Thus-Come One tied it once, he made what we would call a knot. If he had tied it a hundred times, we would say there were a hundred knots. In fact, there are six knots in the scarf; the Buddha did not tie as many as seven, nor did he stop at five. Why then does the Thus-Come One acknowledge the first knot, but not the second or the third?”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “You understand that this precious scarf is a single strip of cloth. My tying it six times might be said to have made six knots, but examine the question more carefully. The implication of your answers is that, although the essential nature of the scarf is unchanged, the knots have nevertheless changed it. What do you think? When I first tied a knot in the scarf, you said it was the first knot. I ask you: would you call the sixth knot I tied the first knot?”

“No indeed, World-Honored One. Since there are six knots, we certainly cannot say that the sixth knot is the first knot. With all my lives devoted entirely to learning and debate, what would lead me to confuse the sixth knot with the first?”

The Buddha said, “You are right. The six knots are not identical. Let us examine how they were made. They were all created out of the one scarf; still, it would not do to confuse their order. The same may be said of the six faculties of perception. Within what is ultimately one, differentiation eventually arises.”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “Suppose you were displeased by the six knots in your scarf and would prefer it to be a single length of cloth. How would you go about untying the knots?”

Ānanda said, “As long as these knots are in the scarf, there will naturally be disagreement about which one of them is which. But if the Thus-Come One were now to untie them all and no further knots were tied, then there would be no question as to which was which, since there would be no first knot left, much less a sixth.”

The Buddha said, “‘When the six are untied, the one will vanish’ is the same idea. Since time without beginning, due to your deranged confusion about the nature of your mind, your awareness has become distorted, and these distortions have not ceased. The strain on the awareness generates perceived objects. It is as in the example of your eyes staring until they become so stressed that they see flowers in the sky. Amidst the clarity of enlightened understanding, deranged confusion arises for no good reason. The mountains, the rivers, and everything else in this world — as well as the processes of dying and being reborn and of entering into nirvana — are mere derangements caused by stress, mere distortions, mere flowers in the sky.”

The Thus-Come One thereupon picked up the knotted scarf, and having tugged the scarf to its left end, he asked Ānanda, “Is this the way to untie it?”

Ānanda replied, “No, World-Honored One.”

Then, having tugged at the other end of the scarf, the Buddha again asked Ānanda, “Is that the way to untie it?”

Ānanda again replied, “No, World-Honored One.”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “I have now tugged on both ends of the scarf, but I was not able to untie the knots that way. How would you untie them?”

Ānanda said respectfully to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, you must pull on the scarf from within each knot. Then they will come undone.”

The Buddha said to Ānanda, “Yes, you are right. If you wish to untie the knot, you pull on the scarf from within each of the knots.

“Ānanda, I have explained that the Dharmas for becoming a Buddha arise through causes and conditions, but these Dharmas are not the coarse attributes that arise from inhering in perceived objects or conjoining to them. The Thus-Come One explains worldly and world-transcending phenomena, and he knows the fundamental causes and the conditions by which these phenomena arise — to the point that he knows how many drops of rain are falling in a world that lies beyond as many other worlds as there are sand-grains in the River Ganges, and near at hand, he understands the fundamental reasons for every sort of phenomenon: why pines are straight, why brambles bend, why geese are white, why crows are black.

“Therefore, Ānanda, carefully choose one faculty of perception from among the six. If you untie the knot of that faculty, its objects will disappear by themselves. All delusion will melt away. How can what remains not be what is real?

“Ānanda, I now ask you: can we untie the six knots in this cotton scarf all at the same time?”

“No, World-Honored One. These knots were tied in sequence in the first place, so now they must be untied in sequence. Though the six knots are all in the same scarf, they were not tied all at the same time. Therefore, in freeing them, they cannot be untied all at the same time.”

The Buddha said, “The same may be said of freeing the knots of the six faculties. In the first stage of freeing a faculty, one understands that the self is empty. Once that emptiness is fully understood, one can become free of attachment to phenomena. Once one is free from attachment to phenomena, then both self and phenomena have been emptied and will no longer arise. This is the patience that the Bodhisattva develops by means of samādhi — the patience with the state in which no mental objects come into being.”