

Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra

A Detailed Exposition

by Living Buddha Lian Sheng, Grandmaster Sheng-Yen Lu

Translated into English by the Vajra Lotsawas

Homage to the most precious root guru,
the embodiment of all dharma realms.

Homage to Sakyamuni Buddha.

Homage to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

We offer our humble translation to the lineage root guru of

True Buddha School,

His Holiness Living Buddha Lian Sheng,

Grandmaster Sheng-Yen Lu.

This translation is only possible due to his tremendous blessings.

May sentient beings receive immeasurable benefits
from reading and penetrating this sutra.

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23 Doing Good with a Pure Heart and Mind

“Furthermore, Subhuti, in anuttara samyaksambodhi, everything is equal without any distinction. Practicing all good dharma without any notion of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan will result in anuttara samyaksambodhi.

“Subhuti, the Tathagata states that the so-called good dharma is not good dharma; it is merely named good dharma.”

**Why does the Buddha say
that good deeds are not good deeds?
With respect to the whole universe,
how significant can your good deed be?
Thus the Buddha says
good deeds are nonexistent.**

Discourse 70

March 27, 2022

We have covered the title of chapter twenty-three—*Doing Good with a Pure Heart and Mind*. Now let's discuss the content. Here the Buddha repeats the same riddle-like phrases:

"...the so-called good dharma is not good dharma; it is merely named good dharma."

By now we should all be familiar with this kind of phrase, as Sakyamuni Buddha uses it throughout the sutra. I learned to pronounce *anuttara samyaksambodhi* using the Taiwanese dialect, as how my mother used to pronounce it. I like it much better than pronouncing it in Mandarin; it is closer to the Sanskrit.

"...in anuttara samyaksambodhi, everything is equal without any distinction."

Dharma [everything] is equal. Ponder it! Buddhanature is certainly equal: there is no distinction between your buddhanature and mine, no scales, levels, or rankings.

Let's take the entire universe as an example. Which way is up, and which way is down? All differentiation is construed by human beings. On which part of the Earth do you live—the top or bottom? Who is above whom on Earth? The Earth seems to be beneath our feet, so is it always below us? The Earth is round, so when it rotates, are you then beneath it?

Remember the grains of sand in the Ganges River? The Earth is like a tiny grain of sand relative to the entire universe. Science considers nine planets in our solar system: Neptune, Uranus, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Earth, Venus, Mercury, and Pluto [dwarf planet]. There are also multitudes of satellites and meteors in the universe, and now manmade satellites add to them. The universe is so vast and immeasurable, and the Earth is just one tiny speck among them. Can you pinpoint where you really are?

Scientists discovered the heliopause, a sort of boundary around our solar system that is [nearly] impossible to pass through. The hypothesis is that there are hundreds of solar systems with hundreds of suns, yet we're unaware of them because we don't see their light.

While studying land surveying in college, I learned a little about stargazing. We observed the stars through a telescopic device that identifies all the stars [including planets, constellations, and satellites]. All the known stars are recorded in the chart in the specified hour, minute, and second according to Greenwich Mean Time, Greenwich being a [historically] small village in London, England. GMT is the standard time used for observation. We observed the night sky and saw stars passing through the mercury lens. At a specific hour, a star would pass by, and we would check which one it was in the chart based on the time it appeared. Each star is named after its discoverer, and its brightness is recorded on a scale from one to four, with one being the brightest.

Can you imagine how vast the universe is? It is boundless! Imagine how many stars there are. Each star that we can see has a name attached to it. Looking at the telescope, I was hopeful that an unnamed star would appear so I could name it the Sheng-Yen Lu star [laughs]. Thus far, I have not seen an unnamed one. Science allows us to see stars as they pass through the sky at a particular time using a stargazing instrument called the “lunar occultation instrument.”

The universe is so vast! Amazingly, over 2,600 years ago, Sakyamuni Buddha talked about the three-thousand-great-thousand-world. The three-thousand-great-thousand-world refers to the whole universe. One great-thousand world consists of three thousand medium-thousand worlds; one medium-thousand world comprises three thousand small-thousand worlds, whereas one small-thousand world makes up three thousand worlds. The Earth is just one world, and three thousand such worlds make up only one small-thousand world. Imagine, how many worlds are there in the so-called three-thousand-great-thousand-world?

Indeed, Sakyamuni Buddha was not an ordinary human being; he certainly is a buddha! He also refers to each grain of sand in the Ganges River as one world, within which there is another Ganges River with all its sand. How much sand is there? This is the same analogy as the three-thousand-great-thousand-world. In this vast universe, how can anyone discern and determine? It is impossible to ascertain. Think about it.

Anuttara samyaksambodhi is analogous to the whole cosmic space, termed the three-thousand-great-thousand-world. How can there be any ranking to it? Everything is essentially equal. The ordinary human brain cannot possibly fathom the three-thousand-great-thousand-world. Yet, Sakyamuni Buddha can. This shows how truly remarkable he is. Only someone with the Buddha’s wisdom can do so.

The Buddha states this ultimate truth: everything is equal with no distinctions. Only then is it called buddhanature because there is no self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan. Based on this principle, one does a good deed without any motive or distinction; this is called an unconditional act.

I don’t do anything for any reason at all. Do I do it for money? No! Fame and status? No! I act without any motive and without self, others, sentient beings, or lifespan. Why do I do it, then? I

simply practice all good dharma [goodness], knowing that anuttara samyaksambodhi is to help sentient beings.

“Subhuti, the Tathagata states that the so-called good dharma is not good dharma; it is merely named good dharma.”

Now I want to explain *good dharma*. Indeed, good dharma is not good dharma; it is just called good dharma. Why do we say so? Doing good deeds is good dharma, right? How come it is *not* good dharma?

There is a common saying among medical doctors, “Doctors practice medicine to save the world!” They indeed perform good deeds as they save lives, cure illnesses, relieve pain and suffering, and treat cancer and many incurable diseases. Some don’t ask for rewards, and some go out of their way to help the needy, even going to Africa to serve for free and so on. Many doctors are doing good deeds.

But, well, is it really a good deed? Ponder a little deeper. Has anyone been spared from dying? All their efforts are transient because in the end people still die. The patients eventually die, and the doctors die too. Sheng-Yen Lu, who is teaching dharma here today to save sentient beings, will also die, and those who listen to the dharma are no exception.

I often ask Tenzin Gyatso, “How old are you?” “Nineteen,” Tenzin replies. [You are a] kindergarten baby! When I was nineteen, I was still quite naïve. Will you still be here in a hundred years? [Tenzin replied, “No.”] Be brave! You should strive to live to 120 years old! [laughs] It’s not easy, yet the Venerable Elder Xu Yun lived to be 120. Truly incredible!

A hundred years from now, neither the speaker of the dharma nor the listeners will be here, not even the youngest ones, including the babies. Will this same group of people be here in 120 years? No. When both the speaker and the listeners are gone, what deliverance is there to speak of? Am I not teaching dharma to deliver sentient beings? But what sentient beings? Likewise, have doctors saved the world? Who have you saved?

Strictly speaking, in principle, what good deed are we talking about? There is *no* good deed. Everything, including all good deeds, is transient. Suffering is momentary; the alleviation of suffering is momentary too. Wealth only lasts for a time; there is nothing to envy. Beauty is even more fleeting; what is there to envy? Soon, a beautiful woman will be all wrinkled, without teeth, and suffering from osteoporosis.

As you can see, what kinds of good deeds are these? Therefore, the Tathagata says the so-called good deed is not a good deed but merely named a good deed. The Tathagata—Sakyamuni Buddha—is so remarkable, for he had this understanding long ago! Thus, we say that a good deed (good dharma) is nonexistent. Everything is only momentary, and in the end, there is nothing. When all is gone, there is no self, others, sentient beings, or lifespan—and thus, true buddhanature appears.

In sum, the Tathagata says that a good deed is not a good deed when it is done conditionally. Only when it is unconditional is it called a good deed, but not if you do it for any reason.

Some doctors want to make money. Some wear valuable jewelry and say that they got their diamond ring after performing surgery, or a golden belt buckle after an appendectomy. Rich Taiwanese men have belt buckles made of gold. Another mentioned that he got his Rolex watch after performing brain surgery, and a gold and diamond jeweled bracelet after curing hemorrhoids! If you do good deeds for the above, good deeds are not good deeds. It is only a good deed if we expect nothing in return.

Even when what is done is good, it is also transitory. There is no everlasting good dharma except empty-nature. The only everlasting good dharma is empty-nature. The only anuttara samyaksambodhi is practicing empty-nature, generating clear-light radiance within your heart-mind, and then merging with the light of the universe. True good dharma—the everlasting good dharma—is the buddhanature; it is the clear-light radiance and lucidity maintained inside our heart-mind. Anything else is not!

When the Sixth Patriarch Huineng said that good and bad do not exist, he was talking about buddhanature. Look! The Earth is likened to a tiny grain of sand in the Ganges River, so how significant can our good deeds be? Think of the ants carrying grains of rice or crumbs to feed the hungry. Do you notice the good deeds of these ants? When was the last time you noticed them?

Likewise, it is a good deed when we provide disaster relief to, say, Ukrainian refugees. Our Sheng-Yen Lu Foundation and Lotus Light Charity Society also do these kinds of good deeds, sending disaster relief packages to Ukraine and Poland to help the needy. They are considered good deeds since we do them without any conditions, and we do so regularly. However, in the grand scheme of the universe, this is as minuscule as the ants' moving of food crumbs. They are only transient good deeds that don't last long.

The eternal good deed is buddhanature, where the clear-light radiance inside your heart-mind shines brightly and merges with the great clear-light radiance of the universe—which is the vast emptiness. Only this is called *siddhi*—true spiritual attainment!

This is what Sakyamuni Buddha teaches.

Om mani padme hum.

24 Incomparable Blessings and Wisdom

“Subhuti, in comparison to the act of giving seven kinds of precious jewels amounting to all the Mount Merus—the king of mountains—in the three-thousand-great-thousand-world, a person who accepts, upholds, recites, and expounds the Prajnaparamita Sutra, even if only the four-line verse, will have much greater blessings, by more than a hundred times, a trillion times, or beyond any calculation and comparison.”

**Buddhadharma
expands our heart and mind
to be as vast as the sky
so that we can embrace
anything and everything.**

Discourse 71

April 2, 2022

We will now discuss chapter twenty-four—*Incomparable Blessings and Wisdom*. Indeed, blessings and wisdom are beyond compare. Sakyamuni Buddha loves to use analogies in his teachings. He often uses the sand in India’s Ganges River as an analogy: If each grain of sand in the Ganges River is likened to one Ganges River, can one count the total number of sand grains in all those rivers? Impossible. In chapter twenty-four, he uses another analogy to compare blessings and wisdom. Before explaining the text, let’s discuss the comparison first.

What analogy does the Buddha use this time?

“...the act of giving seven precious jewels amounting to all the Mount Merus—the king of mountains—in the three-thousand-great-thousand-world...”

There is only one Mount Meru in the saha world. It is the tallest and biggest and is referred to as the king of all mountains. So why does this sentence refer to *all* Mount Merus? This phrase is a bit strange, isn’t it? Can you conjure up what is described here?

Buddhist cosmology consists of Mount Meru at the center, surrounded by four major continents and eight subcontinents. The four major continents are Purvavideha in the East, Jambudvīpa in the South, Aparagodaniya in the West, and Uttarakuru in the North. Further away are the eight subcontinents, surrounded by a fragrant ocean. There is only one Mount Meru, and since it is the highest, it is called Mount Meru, the King of All Mountains.

Why does the Buddha say “all Mount Merus”? This is puzzling. Is there more than one Mount Meru? No, there is only one King of the Mountains, Mount Meru, the tallest in Buddhist cosmology, and no other Mount Merus. Then why does he say *all* Mount Merus?

Sakyamuni Buddha uses this analogy to illustrate the extent of giving: Imagine a Mount Meru in each of the worlds in the three-thousand-great-thousand-world and a gift of precious jewels

amounting to all of them combined. One Mount Meru alone is humongous; can you imagine how big it must be to have a countless number of Mount Merus all piled together?

A person who gives seven precious jewels amounting to all the biggest Mount Merus in the three-thousand-great-thousand-world is compared to another person who accepts, upholds, recites, and expounds the *Vajra Sutra*, even if it is only the four-line verse. The latter will have much greater blessings by incalculable measure. I have explained what it means to accept, uphold, recite, and expound on the sutra. This is all this chapter contains.

In other words, an immeasurable act of giving is nothing compared to the four-line verse of the *Vajra Sutra*. They are beyond comparison. The key point is that any act of giving in the saha world is limited. Worldly acts of giving generate small blessings and small wisdom. While blessings in this world are limited, the blessings of the beyond-worldly path are limitless. Only cosmic space and buddhanature are truly limitless.

Sakyamuni Buddha often uses analogies. He uses the sand of the Ganges River to denote innumerability and Mount Meru to signify a colossal size when comparing merits and blessings. In any case, no matter how many acts of giving you do in the saha world, it is always limited; it can never compare to the limitless. What is limitless? The *Vajra Sutra* is, as is the four-line verse—the non-phenomena of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan. This is the true infinity, as expounded by Sakyamuni Buddha.

Here is a simple analogy. Let's take this necklace of chanting beads. Assume each bead represents one planet. Earth, where the saha world is located, is one of those beads. These other beads represent the other planets and satellites—and many more. How much can a good deed on Earth—this one bead—amount to? See, this small bead is the Earth, and there are many countries on it, and you are merely one of the multitudes of people somewhere doing good deeds. How much merit can it be? Very tiny! Your charity in this saha world is much too insignificant, considering the vastness of the solar system or the whole universe. All Mount Merus combined are just a chain of chanting beads.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that you should not do any charity. You should still do it. However, worldly good deeds are too minuscule and insignificant compared to true merit. This is the comparison that Sakyamuni Buddha makes to convey a point.

One Mount Meru is already very large, yet so many Mount Merus combined are likened to a necklace of beads. How can you compare the limited with the limitless? It is impossible to compare the limited with the limitless; it is beyond comparison. Thus, *Incomparable Blessings and Wisdom*. What is limitless is the *Vajra Sutra* and, essentially, the non-phenomena of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan. Now do you all understand this chapter?

Buddhism and buddhadharma—the teachings of the Buddha—are limitless. Sadly, the mind of some Buddhists become narrower and narrower as they practice, indicating that they have

walked down the wrong path. Buddhist practices should expand our hearts and minds to be as vast as the sky so that we can embrace anything and everything. Such is buddhadharma!

Practicing Buddhism for your own sake is very limited, whereas practicing for the sake of sentient beings is more expansive. Yet because you still hold the phenomena of sentient beings, it is not as vast as the cosmic space, which of course is limitless!

According to the Buddha, nothing is real in the saha world—which means none of the phenomena of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan inherently exist. Is there anything that is real? Nothing whatsoever!

Do you think the things you see, hear, or touch are real? They are nothing but illusions! You might think you have lots of money, but do you know that your money is not yours? You think those fancy cars are yours, but they are not. You think that you own a property, but you don't. What actually belongs to you? Nothing! Even your body is not yours. According to Sakyamuni Buddha, everything you see, hear, or touch is not yours. These things are just for you to enjoy momentarily. Eventually, they will all disappear. I like to quote this saying: while you are in heaven, your money is in the bank, your wife is in another person's embrace, and your brothers are fighting over your inheritance. There is nothing in this world that is truly yours.

When you comprehend this concept of infinity as spoken by the Buddha, your heart and mind expand and become all-embracing. So much so that if a thief steals from your house, you will think, "Well, since I'm not using it, others can." Do you have such magnanimity? Can you let someone enjoy your belongings with such generosity? Can you remain unbothered, knowing someone else is enjoying your things, and believe that it's the same whether you or someone else uses them?

We need to learn to let our heart and mind embrace this way. Jesus says if someone takes your outerwear, you might as well give him your underwear. This is what Jesus says, not me. Even Jesus knows this principle and teaches us to love our enemies. But again, the so-called enemies don't exist in this world. You call them enemies if they disadvantage you, but if they benefit you, they are your friends. It all boils down to self-interest! Why should there be any enemies? Broaden your heart to be as vast as the universe. Otherwise, it would be impossible for you to attain any spiritual fruition. If you become increasingly narrow-minded and small-hearted, how can there be any attainment?

Do you think you have money? That stuff is just paper! It can only be used in your country or, at most, on Earth, but not when you leave the Earth—it's not money then. If a country disappears from the face of the Earth, its money becomes worthless. At such a time, money is not money, so money is not real.

[Another joke] This is related to real money and fake money. On Ancestors' Day, Ming went to the cemetery to burn spirit money for his ancestors. He was astonished at how spirit money looks exactly like real money nowadays. As he was burning it, he felt a tinge of reluctance. Just as he

finished, his wife called and asked, “Weren’t you going to the cemetery to burn spirit money for the ancestors? How come you didn’t take the spirit money with you? Also, where are the sixty thousand dollars [TWD] I just withdrew? I placed them on the table next to the spirit money. Do you know where they went?” Upon hearing that, Ming cried his heart out, and people visiting neighboring tombs praised him, “What a filial descendent, crying so earnestly for his ancestors! It’s rare to find such a person these days.” Worst of all, that night, his ancestors appeared in his dream, complaining that the netherworld police had arrested them for using counterfeit money.

Now, I am asking you. What are real bills, and what are fake bills? If people agree that something is money, then it is money. If not, then it is not money. When a government approves it as money, it is recognized as money. Otherwise, it is not. So, money is not real [it is not absolute]. Just as money is a false reality, so is everything else in this world. Nothing is real; everything is illusory.

Therefore, the Buddha says that the human world is nothing but a mere illusion. Are you searching for something real? It can only be found in buddhadharma. Even buddhadharma is not real; it is merely a means to teach you how to become pure. Only by becoming pure can you see buddhanature.

Buddhadharma is only a tool, as mentioned in the *Vajra Sutra*. It is a raft that brings you to the shore of liberation. Once you arrive, you have reached attainment, so you will not need the raft anymore. Buddhadharma is just a means to help you arrive at the shore of liberation. Sakyamuni Buddha’s teaching is closer to reality. Everything else in this world has no reality to it.

Om mani padme hum.

25 Manifesting All Illusions

“Subhuti, what do you think? One should not say that the Tathagata holds the notion, ‘I am delivering sentient beings.’ Subhuti, do not hold such a view. Why? Because there are no sentient beings to be delivered by the Tathagata. If sentient beings were to exist, it means that the Tathagata still has a notion of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan.

“Subhuti, the Tathagata states, ‘The self has no self, yet mundane people believe that they have a self.’

“Subhuti, the Tathagata says that mundane beings are not mundane beings; they are merely named mundane beings.”

Buddhanature has always been inherent within you.

Only you can deliver yourself.

The Buddha does not deliver you.

Instead, he simply teaches the ways to liberation.

His teaching is referred to as buddhadharma.

Discourse 72

April 3, 2022

All right, let us discuss chapter twenty-five—*Manifesting All Illusions*.

What is the key point here? All sentient beings embody buddhanature. The Buddha does not deliver you; instead, he simply teaches the ways to liberation. His teaching is referred to as buddhadharma. You listen to the buddhadharma, understand it, and cultivate accordingly to deliver and purify yourself, so your buddhanature can manifest.

Buddhanature has always been inherent within you. Only you can deliver yourself. Nobody else can—not even the Tathagata (the Buddha), because buddhanature is your very own. How can others deliver you? The Buddha simply teaches us the means of purifying ourselves. I purify and deliver myself. Upon delivering myself, my buddhanature will manifest, and I will attain buddhahood. I reach attainment (*siddhi*) on my own, and it is not done by the Buddha.

The Buddha says, “It is not I who delivers sentient beings; sentient beings deliver themselves. I simply teach you how to purify yourself. By doing so, you will deliver yourself and reach buddhahood on your own.” This is the fundamental meaning [of this passage].

Therefore,

“One should not say that the Tathagata holds the notion, ‘I am delivering sentient beings.’”

Every sentient being delivers themselves. Do you understand this now? No one can save you; only *you* can save yourself. Because your buddhanature has always been within you, once you purify yourself, you will become a *siddha*—the one with attainment. But if you do not purify yourself, how can the buddhas, or anyone, deliver you?

The Buddha never thinks that he delivers sentient beings—this refers to the nonexistence of a speaker and listener. The Buddha teaches us buddhadharma so we can purify ourselves.

Buddhadharma is just a tool, like a screwdriver that you use to tighten yourself, especially when you are too loose. It is analogous to your effort and diligence in spiritual cultivation. By exerting and persevering, you gradually purify and deliver yourself, eventually leading to attainment.

Likewise, the Buddha talks about this concept of taking refuge. In whom do you take refuge? Typically we say that we take refuge in Grandmaster Lu, or we take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. But in fact, we take refuge in ourselves—our own self-nature, which is buddhanature. This is called self-refuge—taking refuge in oneself, referring to self-deliverance.

By now, we can comprehend why the Buddha states that *there are no sentient beings to be delivered*. Why? Because one delivers oneself. There is no such thing as the Tathagata delivering your buddhanature! You deliver yourself!

In fact, the Tathagata has never delivered a single being. If a buddha were to deliver a sentient being, then this buddha is not a buddha as he teaches buddhadharma with a cause¹—it is conditioned. The Buddha's teaching is without a cause—unconditioned. If there were a buddha who taught due to a cause, he would still hold a notion of self, meaning he would still have the phenomena of self; thus, he would not be a buddha.

If you are pleased to have delivered all sentient beings, please don't be! You have delivered nobody, as everyone delivers themselves. Besides, how can anyone exist in the non-phenomena of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan? Whom have you delivered? No one!

Thus the Buddha says that "I" am without a self, as stated in the sutra.

"Subhuti, the Tathagata states, 'The self has no self, yet mundane people believe that they have a self.'"

Mundane people believe in the existence of a self. Consequently, self-interest arises due to this notion of *self*. Once you start thinking there is an "I," you become self-centered; selfishness arises in your heart. Buddhists should not be selfish and should achieve selflessness by holding no notion of self. On the contrary, mundane beings tightly cling to this notion of self.

The Buddha said,

"Subhuti, the Tathagata says that mundane beings are not mundane beings; they are merely named mundane beings."

To the Buddha, ordinary people are not ordinary; they are buddhanature; they are buddhas. However, ordinary people—mundane beings—cling to this notion of self; they believe that they are mundane beings, hence the term *mundane beings* exists. In the eyes of the Buddha, mundane beings are not mundane beings; mundane beings is a mere term.

¹ Cause, as in cause and effect

As people have a notion of self, they become self-centered. We need to discard this notion. The Buddha teaches us to be selfless and eliminate the notion of self by being mindful of the nonexistence of self. We must remind ourselves, “no self, no self, no self...” all day long. This is to remind us not to be selfish! Because as soon as [a thought of] self appears, we become self-centered, and things begin to revolve around ourselves, “This is mine, and that is yours, or theirs. Or I want them all. I will choose the best part first, keep all the good stuff to myself, and leave the bad ones for others.” This is selfishness.

Instead, the right mindset is to treat everyone equally, because buddhanature means equal-nature. This is the principle. Do you understand this chapter?

Om mani padme hum.

26 Dharmakaya Has No Phenomena

“Subhuti, what do you think? Can one perceive the Tathagata through the thirty-two marks of perfection?”

Subhuti replied, “Yes, World-Honored One! One can perceive the Tathagata through the thirty-two marks of perfection.”

The Buddha said, “If a tathagata is perceived through the thirty-two marks of perfection, then a cakravartin would be a tathagata.”

Subhuti said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, I understand. One should never perceive a tathagata through the thirty-two marks of perfection.”

The World-Honored One then spoke this verse:

“Anyone who sees me as form
or seeks me in sound
is on the wrong path
and cannot perceive the Tathagata.”

**A dharma body
has no appearance or phenomena.
It can only be attained
by purifying the body, speech, and mind,
and it cannot be determined through form or sound.**

Discourse 73

April 9, 2022

This is chapter twenty-six—*Dharmakaya Has No Phenomena*. What does it mean? A dharmakaya—dharma body—is pure and without any phenomena; it has no form, appearance, or any other phenomena. That is the title. Now onto the text:

“Subhuti, what do you think? Can one perceive the Tathagata through the thirty-two marks of perfection?”

Does this mean that anyone with thirty-two marks of perfection is a tathagata?

Subhuti replied, “Yes, World-Honored One! One can perceive the Tathagata through the thirty-two marks of perfection.”

Subhuti did not reply directly, but he suggested that the Tathagata seems to be endowed with thirty-two marks of perfection. It is correct that the Tathagata has thirty-two marks of perfection. However, the Buddha continued,

“If a tathagata is perceived through the thirty-two marks of perfection, then a cakravartin would be a tathagata.”

In other words, if anyone with thirty-two marks of perfection is a tathagata, then a cakravartin—a supreme ruler who turns the wheel—would be a tathagata too.

Everyone knows about the thirty-two marks of perfection. When Sakyamuni Buddha appears with form, he is endowed with thirty-two marks of perfection and eighty secondary marks of proper conduct. But does having thirty-two marks of perfection make one a tathagata? Subhuti did not dare to answer, so the Buddha continued,

“If a tathagata is perceived through the thirty-two marks of perfection, then a cakravartin would be a tathagata.”

What is a cakravartin? Buddhists have debated over who and what constitutes a cakravartin, and there have been varying opinions. Use your phones to check the internet; I want to see how “cakravartin” is defined in the Buddhist Encyclopedia. [Master Lian Chuan speaks.] Okay. [Ambassador Liao speaks.] Thank you.

The Buddhist Encyclopedia defines it as a king in the human world. In India, people consider a cakravartin to be a worldly king. The question is, are there any cakravartins in today’s world? No one fits the criteria as defined in the Buddhist Encyclopedia. Nobody has the signs of a flywheel or the seven treasures,¹ all of which are intangible.

Let’s consider the kings of the modern world. Which country is presently most influential? U.S. President Joe Biden is said to have a great deal of influence. But does he have thirty-two marks of perfection? Not even one! Is there a country leader endowed with the thirty-two marks of perfection? Or even just one of those marks? How can there be any cakravartins in today’s world?

Just now, Master Lian Chuan and Ambassador Liao basically said the same thing. Since we cannot find a cakravartin in this saha world, what exactly is a cakravartin? India’s King Asoka was very famous for turning the wheel of Buddhism during the Mauryan Empire. Do you know what he looked like? Did he have thirty-two marks of perfection? Many people argue over what defines a cakravartin.

In my opinion, the so-called cakravartin the Buddha speaks of is intangible. How can there be a human being whose ears are so long that the lobes touch the shoulders? That is one of the thirty-two marks of perfection. Of course, if you tilt your head toward your shoulder, your ear can touch the shoulder. [laughs] My ears are considered quite long—and this is as long as they get after pulling on them for ages. When I was little, my ears were as small as those of a mouse, so people nicknamed me “Mousy.” Now my ears are much bigger and longer, yet they still don’t hang down to touch my shoulders.

One of the thirty-two marks of perfection is a tongue so long and wide that it can cover one’s whole face. Is that even possible? Where can you find such a tongue? The *Amitabha Sutra* states that this long and wide tongue can cover not only the whole face but also the three-thousand-great-thousand-world. It’s the mark of speaking truthfully. Can you find a person with such a mark?

Another mark of perfection is arms that hang below the knees when standing upright. Do any of you here have this mark? If you do, then you can have my bag. Does such a person exist? Even I don’t have this mark. That’s why I believe the cakravartin mentioned by the Buddha is intangible.

¹ According to the Buddhist Encyclopedia, a cakravartin possesses seven treasures: a wheel, elephants, horses, jewels, jewel-like women, ministers of financial affairs, and generals.

Are you familiar with the Yamas of the Ten Halls (Ten Kings of Hells)? The king of the first hall is called King Qinguang. The king of the fifth hall is King Yama. The king of the tenth hall is King Zhuanlun, meaning the king who turns the wheel. Do they have thirty-two marks of perfection? Have you seen the Kings of Hells? There are ten of them in the ten halls of hell, collectively addressed as the Yama Kings, named after the king of the fifth hall. The king of the tenth hall is referred to as the King Who Turns the Wheel—a term very similar to cakravartin—the Supreme King Who Turns the Wheel. Nobody has ever seen a cakravartin. If someone has gone to hell and met the Yama King of the tenth hall, they usually never return alive. Even if they do come back to life, they don't talk about the appearances of the Yama Kings. So, the appearances of the Yama Kings is based on imagination. In my personal opinion the thirty-two marks of perfection and the eighty secondary marks are about the intangible. Cakravartins, too, are intangible.

According to the Daoist Encyclopedia, there are the Three Great Emperor Officials. The Heavenly Official of Higher Origin and First-in-Rank Who Bestows Blessings turns the wheel in heaven. The Earthly Official of Middle Origin and Second-in-Rank Who Absolves Sins turns the wheel in the saha world. The Water Official of Lower Origin and Third-in-Rank Who Eliminates Misfortunes turns the wheel in the water realm. The Heavenly Official, the Earthly Official, and the Water Official oversee the heavens, earth, and water, respectively.

In China, the [manifestations of] Three Great Emperor Officials are Yao, Shun, and Yu the Great. Yao is the Heavenly Official, Shun is the Earthly Official, and Yu the Great is the Water Official, controller of floods. No one has ever seen them. Have you? No. How about the Three Great Emperor Officials? No. And the Ten Yama Kings? No. They are all intangible.

Let us take our protector deities as an example. Most Taiwanese ancestors immigrated from Fujian Province in China, as did the deities they worship. The protector of Quanzhou is Guang Ze Zun Wang, while the protector of Zhangzhou is Kai Zhang Sheng Wang. San Shan Guo Wang [Lords of the Three Mountains] protects the Hakka. We don't know what they look like because they are intangible. Instead, what we see are their statues, made to resemble the buddhas, endowed with thirty-two marks of perfection.

We have a deity called Mazu on the altar here—a water goddess. What does she look like? She has very long earlobes. The statue of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is complete with thirty-two marks of perfection, as is Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, the savior of the netherworld. Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva turns the dharma wheel of compassion, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva turns the dharma wheel of the hells and the Earth, and the Jade Emperor in Trayastrimsa Heaven turns the dharma wheel of the heavens. Their images all possess thirty-two marks of perfection.

In Buddhism, many beings who turn the dharma wheel of the heavens, hells, water, compassion, or wisdom appear in forms with thirty-two marks of perfection and eighty secondary marks of proper conduct. However, they are not necessarily buddhas. Conversely, buddhas are certainly endowed with thirty-two marks of perfection and eighty secondary marks of perfect conduct.

Pay attention to this passage about the cakravartin. Since finding such a supreme ruler in the saha world is impossible, there has been an ongoing debate about it. I believe the cakravartin described by the Buddha exists only in the intangible realm.

Subhuti said to the Buddha, "World-Honored One, I understand. One should never perceive a tathagata through the thirty-two marks of perfection."

That is right! Only then did Subhuti understand that one should not perceive a tathagata through the thirty-two marks of perfection because a tathagata has no marks, forms, or phenomena. The thirty-two marks of perfection are already intangible, let alone the pure dharmakaya. Pure dharmakaya, of course, has no phenomena.

The World-Honored One then spoke this verse:

*"Anyone who sees me as form
or seeks me in sound
is on the wrong path
and cannot perceive the Tathagata."*

How do we explain this verse? Form is something like the thirty-two marks of perfection. If you think the Tathagata is represented by form or voice, you are walking down the wrong path, and you will not be able to see the Tathagata.

Let me say this: One does not encounter a tathagata by searching for form, voice, or any phenomena. Trying to see a tathagata through any kind of phenomena is futile. The thirty-two marks of perfection and the eighty secondary marks of proper conduct do not necessarily represent a tathagata.

Likewise, pure dharmakaya cannot be perceived through form or voice. Why? Because pure mind—pure buddhanature—pure dharmakaya—lacks any phenomena whatsoever. Pure dharmakaya cannot be sought or determined by any phenomena. If you think that [a certain] voice or appearance represents a tathagata, then you are on the wrong path and cannot encounter the tathagata.

Buddhanature is not something you seek; it manifests naturally once you are purified. If you seek it by voice, form, or any phenomena, you are walking the wrong path and cannot see the tathagata in dharmakaya—the pure dharma body. As such, you cannot transform into a pure dharmakaya either. Now do you understand?

Early on, when I first read the *Vajra Sutra*, I could not understand this. I thought something was not quite right; if we cannot seek the buddha by voice, why do we use our voices to chant "Namo Amitabha"? Is it wrong to chant "Namo Amitabha"? No, it's not wrong. We often chant it, and I chant "Namo Amitabha" every day. We often greet each other by saying "Namo Amitabha." Is that not using our voice? Why is it written that someone seeking the buddha by voice is on the wrong path? I used to be skeptical of this phrase and thought to myself, "Am I on the wrong path

when I recite a buddha's name or pray to the buddhas?" I thought this [phrase] could not be right. So, what is the right thing to do if using voice is the wrong path? Eventually, I realized that my understanding was flawed.

Why does the *Vajra Sutra* state that seeking the buddha by voice is the wrong path, despite our constant chanting? Does it mean we are on the wrong path if we chant the buddha's name every day? No, it does not.

We purify our speech when we chant a buddha's name or mantra, whether loudly or silently. By chanting aloud, we imprint it in our brain. We don't curse, gossip, or lie while chanting the buddha's name. This is purifying our speech. The dharma of purification is to purify our speech, mind, and body. Once purified, you will attain a pure dharma body. Pure dharma body is attained by purifying your body, speech, and mind, and not by seeking it in sound. When you reach purity levels twelve, thirteen, or sixteen, you become a tathagata. This is what it means. This is how I explain *Dharmakaya Has No Phenomena*.

The Buddha says that pure mind and pure dharmakaya have no phenomena and cannot be sought after. You cannot *seek* a pure dharma body. It cannot be obtained through spiritual cultivation either. Dharmakaya naturally manifests once you are completely purified. Now do you understand?

This is the reason why I believe that a cakravartin is also intangible. Ksitigarbha, Avalokitesvara, Manjusri, and many bodhisattvas appear magnificent, with thirty-two marks of perfection. But bodhisattvas are not necessarily buddhas. The Jade Emperor, the Three Great Emperor Officials, and the Yamas of the Ten Halls bear these marks as well, but they are neither buddhas nor bodhisattvas. Although buddhas and bodhisattvas possess the thirty-two marks of perfection, not everyone with these marks is necessarily a buddha or a bodhisattva. That is my explanation.

Some people are beautiful, while some are ugly. You cannot say that a beautiful woman is a good person and an ugly one is evil, right? Whether one is beautiful, handsome, or ugly depends on their causes and conditions from past lives. It is rather intriguing that some people with horrendous appearances possess a kind heart.

Appearance—which is also part of phenomena—is not necessarily what it appears to be. Nevertheless, we believe that the look on your face reflects your heart. In other words, you are responsible for your own face and looks. Even as people age and increasingly show signs of age with wrinkles, age marks, and all those unwanted things, we say spiritual cultivation makes people look kinder and more compassionate, regardless of gender.

Your face reveals whether you have practiced well in your spiritual cultivation. If you appear more and more hostile, something is wrong. What is there to be so vicious about? Even the hunchback doesn't look so ferocious. Let's be kind and amiable. Be polite and friendly. Say "Welcome" when visitors come and "Thank you, goodbye!" when they leave. Don't be rude; hostility will eventually

etch itself onto your face. Is this one of the peculiarities of our Seattle Temple and the Rainbow Temple? Let me tell you, those who show unkind behaviors have not been cultivating spiritually.

Om mani padme hum.

27 No Severance and No Annihilation

“Subhuti, do not ever think that the Tathagata attains anuttara samyaksambodhi due to the absence of the marks of perfection or any phenomena.

“Subhuti, do not regard anuttara samyaksambodhi as severance and annihilation of all phenomena; do not think in this way! Why? Because the one with the mind of anuttara samyaksambodhi does not sever or annihilate all phenomena.”

**One must generate bodhicitta
and give rise to the mind of anuttara samyaksambodhi
because they are necessary for purification to take place.
Only through purification
can one manifest buddhanature
and merge with empty-nature.**

Discourse 74

April 10, 2022

This is chapter twenty-seven—*No Severance and No Annihilation*. What a title! This title and its corresponding passage are the hardest to explain in the *Vajra Sutra*.

At first, the *Vajra Sutra* focuses on emptiness—no phenomena of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan. As I previously elaborated, non-phenomena is likened to the Moon, where nothing exists—all emptiness! No debate over meat or vegetarianism, good or bad. Nothing! We know there are no human beings on the Moon, so “I” do not exist there, “others” do not exist either, and there are no “sentient beings.” As a result, it does not matter whether someone has a short or long lifespan, how much time has passed, or how big a space is. In sum, there are no phenomena of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan.

Let’s say Grandmaster is selling the land of the Moon. Do you want to buy some? [The audience replies yes.] Would you really? It’s very expensive! I could divide a huge piece for you and put it under your name so you can reside there after you die. I would officiate it and give you a guarantee. What would I use the money for? For gas. [laughs] You earn some money, but what good is money on the Moon? Can you spend it there? What is the point if you can’t spend it? Money on the Moon is meaningless, and so is its land. Nowadays, any piece of land or property costs money on Earth, but on the Moon? Although there is so much land there, it is all meaningless. There is no concept of money on the Moon.

This is what we call severance or cutting off. The *Vajra Sutra* first teaches about severance, and now it teaches “no” severance—*No Severance and No Annihilation*—meaning that not everything is nonexistent. This is the most difficult concept to explain.

After the Buddha said that the thirty-two marks of perfection and eighty secondary marks of proper conduct do not necessarily indicate that one is a tathagata, the Buddha proceeded to tell

Subhuti never to assume that the Tathagata attains anuttara samyaksambodhi because he lacks any phenomena. In other words, the absence of the thirty-two marks of perfection and eighty secondary marks of proper conduct does not indicate that one has the mind of anuttara samyaksambodhi. The Buddha emphasized this point to Subhuti.

“Subhuti, do not ever think that the Tathagata attains anuttara samyaksambodhi due to the absence of the marks of perfection or any phenomena.

“Subhuti, do not regard anuttara samyaksambodhi as severance and annihilation of all phenomena; do not think in this way!”

Giving rise to the mind of anuttara samyaksambodhi or generating bodhicitta does not mean one severs and annihilates everything. One should not think that buddhadharma is all about severance and annihilation or that buddhadharma is nothing.

“...the one with the mind of anuttara samyaksambodhi does not sever or annihilate all phenomena.”

To reiterate, the one generating the mind of anuttara samyaksambodhi does not assert that buddhadharma is the severance and the annihilation of all phenomena.

That’s it! What do you think about my explanation? Is it satisfying? Extremely! Because you don’t understand. [laughs] What is Sakyamuni Buddha talking about? Did he not teach emptiness? Did he not teach us to detach ourselves from any phenomena—that self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan do not exist? And that everything should be severed and annihilated? How come the Buddha now says “not” to sever and annihilate everything? What does the Buddha mean, that one does not annihilate all phenomena when one generates bodhicitta?

How do you explain this? Does anyone want to give it a try? [The ambassador raises his hand.] Oh, it’s you again. Okay, go ahead. [He gives a lengthy explanation.] Look at how a lay practitioner can give such a dharma talk while all the ordained masters, monks, and nuns remain silent! Perhaps for you, silence is golden. Ordinarily, the ones teaching the buddhadharma are the monastic people, with laypeople being the listeners. Now the roles have been reversed; how awkward! What a shame that you don’t study hard and don’t say anything. Have you eaten at all? It seems like you only sleep, eat, and play.

When I lived in seclusion [from 2000 to 2006], I was ruthlessly defamed on the internet. Marici Bodhisattva made a bet with me, saying, “None of your monastic disciples will rise to defend you!” I thought, “Surely someone will stand up for their guru, as that defamation was all nonsense.” I told myself that if a monk or nun stood for justice, they deserved an acarya empowerment. To my disappointment, of over 600 monks and nuns, not a single one stood up for their guru. Only lay practitioners bravely defended me. What an embarrassment! I can see that the ambassador is serious about his Buddhist studies and practice. You spoke well.

Madyamaka—the Middle Way—originates from this passage, as Nagarjuna comprehends this principle. He extrapolates that there is both existence and emptiness. If we say there is an

existence, there is! For example, all of us sitting here do exist. Having said that, these are all illusionary—mere illusions—and therefore, existence equates to nonexistence. Thus, we say it is empty!

Nevertheless, knowing that everything is inherently empty does not mean that you should sever and annihilate everything; otherwise, you will fall into nihilism by going to an extreme. In a nihilistic view, one does not care about anything; one does not do anything and thus does not cultivate spiritually anymore.

I recall a heated debate with my father about existence when I was just starting my Buddhist studies. He was very adamant that beyond death, nothing existed. He exclaimed, “What spirit? What soul? Heaven? Hell? Pureland? I can’t see any of them, so they don’t exist!” I insisted they exist, that heaven, hell, and the spirit are real. But he retorted, “No! They don’t exist! So there’s nothing to worry about.” This argument took place on Lunar New Year’s Eve. We were arguing back and forth to the point where he became so enraged that he slammed the table and blurted out, “Forget it! I’m not eating anymore. I’m going to Kaohsiung to hang out with my friends!” In response, I exclaimed, “Fine! I’m going to see my classmates in Kaohsiung too.” Then my mom complained, “What? If you two are heading to Kaohsiung, then what about me? Where will I go?”

We debated existence versus nonexistence. My father was very adamant and extreme about emptiness, declaring, “If it exists, prove it. Did you say souls exist? Show them to me. If you can prove it to me, I’ll consider it.” In retrospect, what I said was not right, either, because all existences are merely illusions.

We need to understand this: Existence or phenomena—although a mere illusion—is there for us to transcend. [By recognizing that it is an illusion,] we use this illusion to liberate ourselves from it.

“There exists something amid nothingness!” Therefore, complete severance and annihilation are incorrect because buddhanature inherently exists within us. We should not talk about cutting off or obliterating since buddhanature still exists. It will naturally manifest upon purification. Buddhanature is our very own, and we purify, liberate, and deliver ourselves—no one else can. Buddhadharma is just a method to purify and liberate ourselves to reveal our buddhanature. Once buddhanature appears, this is an attainment.

So in giving rise to bodhicitta, you cannot say that you will sever and annihilate everything; otherwise, what use is bodhicitta? Why would anyone want to generate bodhicitta if there are no sentient beings to deliver? If there is no self, no others, no sentient beings, and no lifespan, what is the point of generating bodhicitta?

The key is that you *must* generate bodhicitta and give rise to the mind of anuttara samyaksambodhi because they are necessary for purification to take place. Only through

purification can one manifest buddhanature (empty-nature) and merge with it. This is the way to attain fruition.

Just a moment ago, the ambassador spoke quite well about “not counting.” Whether you are teaching dharma, helping sentient beings, writing articles, or painting, keeping track is unnecessary because it’s meaningless. Just continue doing it, no matter what. It’s the same with generating bodhicitta. When you help others, you don’t keep it in mind, and you don’t ask why or what will happen next. You generate bodhicitta and just do it without dwelling on it. This is the teaching of the *Vajra Sutra*.

Nagarjuna’s madyamaka originated from this principle, where the development stage pertains to existence and the perfection stage relates to nothingness; both are equally important and in dual-execution.¹ We must rely on the development stage before reaching the perfection stage. Otherwise, how can one reach the emptiness of the perfection stage without first addressing the existence in the development stage? If you jump straight to emptiness, you ignore the development stage, which means you cut off buddhadharma, dharma teachings, listening, practicing, and cultivating dharma. This severance and annihilation will result in nihilism, as proclaimed by my father, who believed that nothing exists after death.

Thus, it’s a balance of the two: It’s not exactly existence, nor is it completely empty. It’s not somewhere in between, either. Rather, both existence and emptiness are utilized—they are in dual-execution.

The *Heart Sutra* states that *form is emptiness and emptiness is form; form is none other than emptiness, and emptiness is none other than form*. It’s stated very clearly. Form refers to existence—all kinds of forms and phenomena in the saha world. Yet, intrinsically, they are empty in nature. Within emptiness, there is also existence.²

You must generate bodhicitta so you can purify everything in order to enter emptiness and attain fruition—although we don’t say that it is fruition. Generating bodhicitta is to reveal your buddhanature. This is the teaching of Sakyamuni Buddha.

No Severance and No Annihilation

You should not sever and annihilate; otherwise, you will fall into nihilism. The most important thing is to purify yourself, no matter what. You must eradicate all impurities; buddhanature will emerge naturally once complete purity is achieved. This is the key essence of buddhadharma, of this passage in the *Vajra Sutra*, and of Nagarjuna’s middle way, or madyamaka. The key is the dual-execution of both form and emptiness, of both existence and nonexistence, and of the development stage and perfection stage.

¹ It means neither is rejected and neither is in extreme.

² In this case, the existence is the bodhicitta.

I want to add to my explanation of the thirty-two marks of perfection yesterday, as I received some insights from the deities afterward. The Buddha mentions there are four kinds of cakravartins—supreme kings who turn the dharma wheel—and they are the gold, silver, bronze, and iron cakravartins, each bearing thirty-two marks of perfection. The gold cakravartins have appeared numerous times in the past, turning the wheel and ruling the world. Grandmaster has been one of these cakravartins in past lives.

Ksitigarbha turns the wheel of the Earth, Avalokitesvara the wheel of compassion, and Manjusri the wheel of wisdom. Along with Maha Cundi, they are all cakravartins. In the Shambala Kingdom, the first king was Manjusri, and the second was the White Lotus King, both of whom were cakravartins. Paranirmitavasavartin (a heavenly king of the realm of desire), Mahabrahma, and Mahesvara (a heavenly king of the realm of form) are all cakravartins with thirty-two marks of perfection. Buddhas and bodhisattvas who turn the dharma wheel exist, and there are many more cakravartins in the purelands and buddhaverses, all endowed with the thirty-two marks of perfection. This supplements my talk last night.

I have turned the dharma wheel and naturally reached attainment after purifying myself. In such a case, there will be no cause for birth and no cause for death, which is nirvana, siddhi—the state of no birth and no death.

Om mani padme hum.

28 Not Accepting and Not Seizing

“Subhuti, in comparison to a bodhisattva who performs an act of giving seven treasures that amount to the multitude of worlds as countless as the sand grains in the Ganges River, another bodhisattva who does good deeds without any notion of self will have more merit.

“Why, Subhuti? Because all bodhisattvas are not subjected to merits and blessings.”

Subhuti asked the Buddha, “World-Honored One, why do you say that the bodhisattvas are not subjected to merits and blessings?”

“Subhuti, because the bodhisattvas are free from greed and desire when generating merits and blessings, therefore, it is said that the bodhisattvas are not subjected to merits and blessings.”

Although bodhisattvas generate merit,
they neither seize nor grasp it
because they know that it is illusory and dreamlike.
But they still generate merit.
Why? What use is it?
Having merit will let you
abandon the illusory world.

Discourse 75

April 16, 2022

Let's now discuss chapter twenty-eight—*Not Accepting and Not Seizing*. *Not Accepting* means that bodhisattvas do not accept anything like money, fame, name, benefit, or gain—nothing material. *Not Accepting* refers to not doing anything to obtain the above. *Not Seizing* means that bodhisattvas do not seek or seize recognition, benefits, pleasure, or anything at all while performing acts of giving. A true bodhisattva acts without any motive, reason, or expectation.

After so long, we are still discussing merits and blessings,¹ using the sand in the Ganges River as an analogy. Sakyamuni Buddha asked,

“Subhuti, in comparison to a bodhisattva who performs an act of giving seven treasures that amount to the multitude of worlds as countless as the sand grains in the Ganges River, another bodhisattva who does good deeds without any notion of self will have more merit.”

In this chapter, the Buddha uses the act of giving to mean good deeds. In performing good deeds, a bodhisattva who comprehends that everything is essentially devoid of self will gain more merit than the one who does not.

What does it mean that everything is devoid of self? It is the dharma of no-self. A bodhisattva holds no notion of self. When I confer the bodhisattva vow, I always tell the precept holders, “By

¹ In this chapter, 福德 is translated as “merits and blessings” because by this point, its meaning encompasses both “merits” and “blessings.” In the first paragraph in chapter 28, 功德 is used and translated accordingly as “merit.” In subsequent paragraphs, 福德 is used and translated as “merits and blessings” instead of the typical “blessings” we use in earlier chapters, as this would convey the meaning more appropriately. Having that said, most people use both terms interchangeably, and don't differentiate so clearly.

generating the bodhisattva vow, you will always consider others instead of yourself.” The fundamental requirement of the bodhisattva vow is always to think for the sake of others and never for one’s own sake. This is called the dharma of no-self. I remind the precept-holders to constantly keep the benefit of others in mind.

True merit arises when you don’t keep yourself in mind. Conversely, if there is self-interest, then there is no merit. Speaking of merits and blessings, how many merits and blessings are there? Does *an act of giving seven treasures that amount to the multitude of worlds as countless as the sand grains in the Ganges River* generate merit? Yes, of course. Moreover, if the act of giving is performed without any conditions, the merit generated will be even greater.

“Why, Subhuti? Because all bodhisattvas are not subjected to merits and blessings.”

Bodhisattvas do not think about merits and blessings; therefore, they neither accept nor seize them.

Subhuti asked the Buddha, “World-Honored One, why do you say that the bodhisattvas are not subjected to merits and blessings?”

“Subhuti, because the bodhisattvas are free from greed and desire when generating merits and blessings, therefore, it is said that the bodhisattvas are not subjected to merits and blessings.”

Although bodhisattvas generate merits and blessings, they neither seize nor grasp them. Thus, they are not subjected to merits and blessings. This passage is very simple and does not include the typical “the so-called merits and blessings are not merits and blessings. Because they are not merits and blessings, they are merits and blessings.” Usually Sakyamuni Buddha says it, but not this time.

The so-called merits and blessings are not merits and blessings because they are all illusory and dreamlike—without inherent existence. Due to their inherent nonexistence, they are [true] merits and blessings. By knowing that they are illusory and dreamlike, we neither accept nor seize them. Only then do we call them true merits and blessings. What use are these merits and blessings? They allow us to abandon our dreams and illusions. Ponder carefully!

For instance, I, Grandmaster Lu, have no greed or desire for anything in this world. But I drive a Rolls Royce, a high-end car. [One might think,] how can you claim to have no desire while driving a Rolls Royce? Although I drive it, I fully understand that it does not belong to me, and I simply use the car as a means of transportation. All things in this world are merely ours to use temporarily, and they are devoid of true reality.

I have a Maserati, too, so I have two cars. A disciple wanted to give me a Bentley as well, which they bought and drove to me, but I rejected it. Someone heard about it and said, “What! Why don’t you just accept it? After accepting it, you can resell it.” All I had in mind was that I already had two cars. The Rolls Royce is only driven between my home and the temple. It is parked only

inside the garage at the True Buddha Tantric Quarters and the South Mountain Retreat, nowhere else. I drive the Maserati to other places because it's less conspicuous. If I were to park the Rolls-Royce somewhere, I'm afraid it might disappear. [laughs]

It's clear to me that this is all just a dream. In this dream, I may be driving such a car, but I have no desire for it, no attachment to it, and I don't consider the car as mine. I own some valuables, such as a thirty-carat diamond that Marilyn Monroe once wore. I know they are all false, and I have no desire for them. I only occasionally wear these offerings from my disciples; otherwise, they might think I don't like them, and they might give me even more things.

It's been a while since I wore any of them, but I took them out recently. I am wearing a diamond Rolex with my name engraved on its face—a gift from the previous board of the True Buddha Foundation. The other day I wore a Patek Philippe platinum watch embellished with diamonds. Do you know how many watches my disciples have given me? For Piaget watches alone, I have ten of them. In addition, seven or eight gold Rolexes have been auctioned to support temples and their ceremonies. All these valuables will eventually be auctioned off for the benefit of True Buddha School temples and the Sheng-Yen Lu Foundation.

All these watches and valuables were offerings from my disciples, including the two cars given by Dharma Sister Hanifa. I have no desire for them and have never bought any. Never! Why not? Because I know they are only with you temporarily. It doesn't matter how many carats they are; they are meant for temporary enjoyment. You can't possibly own them forever. Even your own body is not yours. Nothing is yours. If you comprehend this, you will neither "accept" nor "seize." You can see through the illusory nature of everything. You won't be greedy for anything as you know it's all false, with no [intrinsic] reality.

What is the Threefold Contemplation of Tiantai School?¹ The first patriarch of the Tiantai School was Venerable Huiwen, who transmitted it to the second patriarch Venerable Huisi who in turn transmitted it to its third patriarch Master Zhizhe. Their teaching is known as One Mind Threefold Contemplation. Why is it called threefold contemplation? Because it focuses on contemplating emptiness, falsehood, and the middle way. What are emptiness, falsehood, and the middle way? The *Vajra Sutra*, too, talks about emptiness, falsehood, and the middle way, as spoken by Nagarjuna.

Think about it: is the world not unreal and illusory? The world, too, will eventually become nothing. The Earth also goes through the four stages of creation, existence, deterioration, and emptiness, just like our bodies. Over time, everything will become nothing.

So why are you still grasping and clinging to anything? You want to neither accept nor seize. Are you clear on this now? A person with no notion of self knows that things like merits and blessings do not exist. Because you recognize that merits and blessings are nonexistent, you have [true]

¹ Tiantai School is an East Asian Buddhist sect with an emphasis on the *Lotus Sutra* and Madyamaka of Nagarjuna Bodhisattva.

merits and blessings. These are the merits and blessings that allow you to break free from the emptiness and falsehood of the saha world.

All things will break down sooner or later. My first Rolls Royce, a gift from Master Lian Chuan's father—Master Lian Xin—broke down, so we sold it. The second car was a Bentley from Dharma Sister Hanifa. I drove it for so long that its manufacturer no longer makes its parts. If it breaks down, it'll be hard to fix. Although it's huge, long, and very beautiful, it's very old, so I returned it to her. [laughs] You can ask the translator, Dharma Sister Hanifa.

Will the current Rolls Royce age and break down? Yes, it certainly will! Then why are you so attached to it? Why do you insist that it is yours and will be yours forever? That is impossible. Cars break down. It seems that diamonds don't break down, but I hear that some aspects of diamonds also deteriorate.

Why do I wear things like this bracelet and Rolex watch? I have been wearing more of them recently, but not for any reason; it's just because I feel like it. Normally, I don't wear any jewelry, but I wear some occasionally because they are offerings from my disciples. I especially wear these two because they have my name, Sheng-Yen, engraved on them. The bracelet, with Sheng-Yen engraved on it in big letters, was offered by a Chinese billionaire. The previous board of the True Buddha Foundation gave me this Rolex watch, also with Sheng-Yen engraved in gold. They are beautiful, right? I wear them because they have my name on them. [laughs] But the reality is, Sheng-Yen does not exist, and it is merely a name. Other than these, I don't quite remember who gave me what. They were all offered by my disciples since I've never bought anything myself!

Grandmaster never desires these things; I know that intrinsically, they are all illusory. I wear them just to show my appreciation for your offerings. If I don't wear them, you might ask, "Have you given away the things I gave you?" or "Don't you like them?" Someone gave me a platinum watch, and because I didn't wear it, they thought I didn't like it. Then they gave me another Patek Philippe watch, also with my name engraved on it. Well, I liked the watch, but it's very heavy, so when I did my prostrations, it pressed against my wrist and hurt.

Remember, everything is for you to use only momentarily. Nothing belongs to you forever. You now understand, right? The *Vajra Sutra* states it very clearly.

"Subhuti, in comparison to a bodhisattva who performs an act of giving seven treasures that amount to the multitude of worlds as countless as the sand grains in the Ganges River, another bodhisattva who does good deeds without any notion of self will have more merit.

"Why, Subhuti? Because all bodhisattvas are not subjected to merits and blessings."

Of course they do not receive any merits and blessings, because inherently, there are no merits and blessings. Merits and blessings are empty—false, unreal. You can enjoy them while having them to make you feel a bit better and more comfortable, but they are just momentary.

Subhuti asked the Buddha, "World-Honored One, why do you say that the bodhisattvas are not subjected to merits and blessings?"

"Subhuti, because the bodhisattvas are free from greed and desire when generating merits and blessings, therefore, it is said that the bodhisattvas are not subjected to merits and blessings."

They do not crave these things. Nowadays there are many billionaires in this world, like Bill Gates. He bought that large piece of land with exceptional geomancy, uphill from here, for Microsoft. Back then, we drove from Ballard to this land where the Seattle temple now stands, and we passed through the area. I said, "This land will belong to the world's richest person!" As it turns out, it is Bill Gates. We drove by the wooded area before Microsoft was there, and I immediately knew that the lot had superior geomancy. I told the people in the car that whoever owned this piece of land would become the world's richest person. You can ask the second and third [Chen] brothers about this; they were in the car with me.

Microsoft bought the land, and indeed, Bill Gates became the world's richest person, just as I predicted. Microsoft is also getting bigger and bigger, buying all the surrounding land, and building more and higher office buildings. But do they really own all these things? No, they can only use them for a while. One day, they will belong to someone else.

The richest person is not the richest. Because he is not the richest person, he is the richest person.

Is there a benefit to being the richest person in the world? Not much—perhaps some small benefit. Even Bill Gates has realized this by now. He donates billions of dollars to charity and generates blessings accordingly, which will allow him to go to heaven. He knows that money is only useful in the saha world. Beyond that, it is meaningless.

I often give this analogy of the Moon: What are considered merits and blessings there? What are good deeds? What are bad deeds? What is the most precious thing there? Think about this example as if you are on the Moon. What is the most expensive thing there? What is the cheapest? All is irrelevant! What is good and what is bad? Nothing. What is buddhadharma? What is true dharma, and what is false dharma? It is irrelevant. On the Moon, who succeeds and who fails? Who wins and who loses? Nobody.

In fact, the same applies to the human world. It is just that humans are being deceived by their own eyes; they are creating their own reality. They think things exist, but the reality is they do not!

How should human beings cultivate spiritually to liberate themselves from these empty illusions of the world? Nagarjuna Bodhisattva told me, "Through the middle way." Only by utilizing the development stage and the perfection stage in dual execution can one abandon the saha world to attain siddhi.

In the previous chapter, where Sakyamuni talks about *No Severance and No Annihilation*, he teaches us not to grasp onto either nothingness or existence. According to Nagarjuna Bodhisattva, one must maintain the middle way and use both existence and emptiness in dual-execution. Then through purification, one can liberate oneself from the illusory realm.

Such is the principle! But if you do not practice diligently and are lazy and not serious about purifying yourself, you will still be bound to the six rebirth realms—even though they are illusory. You will not be liberated from the bondage of the six rebirth realms and will never escape this illusory realm. This is karma—cause and effect!

Buddhadharma states that in addition to understanding, you still need to utilize this illusory human body to practice in the illusory realm in order to abandon the illusory realm. So one day when you abandon your body, you will also free yourself from the illusory realm. Buddhadharma teaches us how to reach this attainment. And only this is considered an attainment. Do you understand what I am saying?

[Someone asks a question about the Chinese character “*ren*” in the sutra text. It generally means endurance.] In this context, instead of “endurance,” this character refers to good deeds; it has a broader meaning. In the *Vajra Sutra*, the Buddha uses the acts of giving to represent all good deeds. As we know, both giving and endurance are part of the six paramitas, and so are precepts, diligence, meditation, and wisdom. But here, in this context, this character represents all goodness and good deeds.

We will continue tomorrow. Om mani padme hum.

29 Serene Dignity

“Subhuti, if someone says that a tathagata seemingly comes and goes and seemingly sits and lies down, this person does not understand my teaching. Why? Because a tathagata never comes and goes, thus, he is called a tathagata.”

**External dignity is important
but not as important as internal dignity.
True dignity is
inner peace and serenity of the mind,
without any thoughts.**

Discourse 76

April 17, 2022

Chapter twenty-nine is entitled *Serene Dignity*. Sakyamuni Buddha said,

“Subhuti, if someone says that a tathagata seemingly comes and goes and seemingly sits and lies down, this person does not understand my teaching. Why? Because a tathagata never comes and goes, thus, he is called a tathagata.”

Tathagata is translated as “one who seemingly comes” in Chinese. Many people recite this passage without knowing what it means; hence, even fewer people can explain it. What does the title *Serene Dignity* mean? What is dignity?

Monastics should carry themselves with dignity and proper decorum. How so? We should walk like the wind, sit like a bell, stand like a pine, and sleep like a bow—swiftly and properly.¹ We should not walk like this [Grandmaster imitates a slouched walking posture]. When two people walk together, they do so shoulder-to-shoulder, and their steps are synchronized. How might others feel if they see a monk walking with no dignity? Monastics follow specific etiquettes and dignity.

I spent time in several Zen temples in Japan, one of which was Tosenji, located in Hakodate, Hokkaido. Japanese temples typically have gravel stones on pathways, and you can hear the sound of footsteps: shack, shack, shack... When two people walk side by side, they walk shoulder to shoulder with their steps synchronized, neither one leading nor following. The rule of dignity applies to how you stand, sit, walk, or sleep. You can't stoop, hunch your back, blow your nose, spit, pick your ears, or scratch your head, as all of these actions are against the rules. Having said that, all of these are only aspects of external dignity.

¹ Sleeping like a bow also indicates that one sleeps sideways to the right, as that is an auspicious posture in Buddhism.

The way we eat at True Buddha School may seem shocking compared to other temples. Why? At other temples, they eat so quietly that you can hear a pin drop. Nobody speaks at mealtime, not even whispering in each other's ears. In contrast, at True Buddha School, whether at the Seattle or Rainbow Temple, we eat and chat. It's very lively, where everybody talks loudly and freely. We are free to do almost everything except perhaps putting our feet up. Our rules are very relaxed in comparison.

At other temples, there is a rule of dignity for eating: one must sit upright and lift the bowl to one's mouth instead of placing it on the table and stooping over to eat. They eat slowly and quietly. When they want more food, instead of speaking up, they use signs to indicate what they need by placing their chopsticks in a certain way. This is dignity, albeit external.

Nevertheless, external dignity alone is not as important as internal dignity, which takes precedence in True Buddha School. Inner dignity comes from within. True dignity is inner peace and serenity of the mind—a state without any thoughts.

What kind of dignity is the Buddha talking about in this chapter? It is the dignity that emerges when you [your mind] are still and serene. When you are unmoved and free of thoughts, that is true dignity. Serenity is dignity.

The Sixth Patriarch says, "Do not think of good or bad." This means one should refrain from discerning whether something is good or bad—it implies not thinking of anything. A mind without any thought is serene. This is the dignity we are talking about. As soon as you feel anger, you have lost self-composure. Losing your temper, raising your voice, feeling indignation, and being rude mean you've lost your manners; this is wrong!

When you embody true dignity, your mind remains unperturbed and serene. Only stability and serenity are true dignity. That is the meaning of the title—only serenity is dignity.

Let me explain the content: A tathagata seemingly comes and goes and seemingly sits and lies down—in appearance, a tathagata is endowed with serene dignity. I have explained that *tathagata* means "seemingly come and seemingly go." Both the One Who Seemingly Comes and the One Who Seemingly Goes are epithets for a buddha. When a tathagata appears—seemingly comes and seemingly goes—he appears serene. For a siddha (the one with attainment), a tathagata will be in their heart-mind or appear before them with a mere thought.

Yet a buddha or tathagata is omnipresent: existing everywhere, filling the whole universe as he is the cosmic space. A tathagata is unmoved and neither comes nor goes. The [Chinese character] "ru" means seemingly, indicating that a tathagata only seemingly comes and seemingly goes; yet in fact, a tathagata does not come and does not go. Only when a tathagata does not come or go is he called a tathagata.

The Buddha explained to Subhuti that if someone thinks that a tathagata seemingly comes to the saha world and seemingly leaves the saha world, or it seems that he sits and sleeps, then this person misunderstands the Buddha's teaching. Why? Because a tathagata, to be called a

tathagata, never comes and goes. Yet, when a tathagata seemingly comes and goes, he appears with serene dignity, which is being unmoved and serene. And this is the best kind of appearance of a tathagata [should he seem to appear in this saha world].

A buddha is not always inside your heart-mind but immediately appears whenever you think of them. You do not have to be in front of a buddha statue to pray to them. Instead, you can give rise to a thought, and a tathagata will appear before you.

I remember a song that goes, “When I think of you, you’re at the edge of the sky. When I think of you, you’re in front of my eyes. When I think of you, you’re on my mind. When I think of you, you’re in my heart.” Is it like that? Does it seem as if the buddha is at the edge of the sky? Not at all! Do they seem to be in front of your eyes? No. Instead, they are on your mind and inside your heart. Buddhas are everywhere—they are omnipresent.

Chapter twenty-nine, *Serene Dignity*, indicates that the greatest dignity is serenity and stability—not external dignity. When you are unperturbed, the buddha is within your mind. When you are serene, you are the buddha. You have become a buddha when your heart-mind is serene and immovable.

Nonetheless, if you think that a buddha comes and goes, sits and lies down, then you are mistaken—that is not a buddha. This is the meaning of Sakyamuni Buddha’s words. A true buddha fills the entire universe. They neither come nor go, and thus they are called a tathagata. [Tathagata is a different name for a buddha, so a buddha, too, does not come or go.] Now do you understand? Generally, without explanation, people don’t understand this passage. But now, you can understand it clearly, right?

From now on, when you recite this sutra, understand that serenity is dignity, stability is dignity, and that a buddha is equivalent to the cosmic space. Whenever you think of them, they enter your heart. When you hold them in your mind, then you are the buddha. A buddha or a tathagata has no forms, appearances, or phenomena; therefore, there is no coming or going or sitting or sleeping.

Om mani padme hum.

30 The Concept of Aggregates

“Subhuti, if a good man or good woman shatters the three-thousand-great-thousand-world into dust particles, will there be innumerable dust particles?”

Subhuti replied, “Innumerable, indeed, World-Honored One. Why? Because were the innumerable dust particles real, the Buddha would not have said innumerable dust particles. And thus, the Buddha says, ‘Dust particles are not dust particles; they are merely called dust particles.’

“World-Honored One, the three-thousand-great-thousand-world spoken by the Tathagata is not a world; it is merely called a world. Why? Because even if the world is real, it is only an aggregate. The Tathagata has said, ‘The aggregate is not an aggregate; it is merely called an aggregate.’”

“Subhuti, the so-called aggregate is unspeakable. However, mundane beings grasp and cling onto it.”

**Every being and everything is an aggregate
that comes into existence
due to causes and conditions.
Once the causes and conditions cease,
the aggregate will dissipate and disappear.**

Discourse 77

April 23, 2022

We are moving on to chapter thirty—*The Concept of Aggregates*.

“Subhuti, if a good man or good woman shatters the three-thousand-great-thousand-world into dust particles, will there be innumerable dust particles?”

Everybody can easily understand this sentence. I have explained the three-thousand-great-thousand-world before. It consists of a great multitude of worlds; they are countless, in fact! In addition, shattering them into dust particles—particles so small, like PM 2.5, that they can't be seen with the naked eye—would result in an infinite number of such particles, wouldn't it? Subhuti replied that there would be countless dust particles.

Subhuti replied, “Innumerable, indeed, World-Honored One. Why? Because were the innumerable dust particles real, the Buddha would not have said innumerable dust particles. And thus, the Buddha says, ‘Dust particles are not dust particles; they are merely called dust particles.’”

If dust particles were real, the Buddha would not have called them dust particles. They are called dust particles for the sake of illustration. Even though there are countless dust particles, in the eyes of the Buddha, they do not exist, and therefore, dust particles are not dust particles. Maybe you don't quite understand just yet. Let's continue.

“World-Honored One, the three-thousand-great-thousand-world spoken by the Tathagata is not a world; it is merely called a world. Why? Because even if the world is real, it is only an aggregate. The Tathagata has said, ‘The aggregate is not an aggregate; it is merely called an aggregate.’”

“Subhuti, the so-called aggregate is unspeakable. However, mundane beings grasp and cling onto it.”

The key point is in “aggregate.” Now, let me explain the meaning of aggregate (*pindagraha*). The term aggregate refers to a combination, composition, union, system, and/or its transformation.

How many people are there in the saha world? A great multitude of them! Among them, there are many races and ethnicities. In China alone, there are the Han Chinese, the Manchu in the Northeast, the Mongols from Mongolia, the Uyghur in Xinjiang, the Tibetans, and the Hmong in the Southeast. Are there many of them? Well, yes, each race includes many people. The city of Shanghai alone has a population of twenty-six million. The population of Metropolitan Chongqing is close to the entire population of Taiwan. The population of a city sometimes surpasses that of a country. There are so many people in the world!

China is densely populated, and so is India. Many countries have large populations and various skin colors: white, dark, fair, yellow, brown, red, and more. However, in the eyes of the buddhas, the so-called human beings do not exist. Why? Because they are merely aggregates. They are all composed of the elements: earth, water, fire, wind, and a life force. They are formed or transformed from these elements.

Viruses like COVID-19 are also transformations; viruses combine with other viruses and create new variants. Similarly in Tantric Buddhism, many buddhas and bodhisattvas manifest through transformations and combinations of various deities. For instance, Yamantaka is the resulting transformation of Manjusri Bodhisattva merging with the Yama King.

What about human beings? Are we not the result of combinations and transformations, too? Each one of us is an aggregate of our father and mother—a long worm (sperm) and a round worm (ovum) combined. Indeed, we are aggregates! Aggregates of what? Of earth, water, fire, and wind elements. The aggregates come into existence due to certain causes and conditions and will dissipate when these causes and conditions cease.

Not only are humans aggregates, but other sentient beings are as well. This includes those that fly in the air, crawl on the ground, and swim in water, as well as bacteria, viruses—all of them. They are combinations and transformations. These small examples also apply to bigger things, such as the Earth, which is an aggregate of earth, water, fire, and wind elements. All the planets and the entire small-thousand world, medium-thousand world, and great-thousand world are combinations, transformations, and aggregates. This is what aggregate means.

Not only are living beings aggregates, but all things—such as tables and chairs—are also aggregates. This table is [made of] wood, and it was transformed from trees. Some part of the tree is shaped and used for the top, some for the drawers, and so on. Add nails and iron parts, and a table is made. The table is an aggregate, and so is a chair. Everything is an aggregate. The incense burner is also an aggregate—a composition of various minerals from the earth.

This expensive item [referring to the necklace Grandmaster is wearing] is also an aggregate. It is made of gold, with a pink tourmaline rubellite as its crown jewel, surrounded by many tiny diamonds and all kinds of gemstones. It is designed like a mandala, where the rubellite is the

main deity and the rest of the gemstones are the retinue. Together they represent a world or a realm. Yet it is merely an aggregate.

Everything is an aggregate, including this mirror. Glass is coated with mercury or silver paint to make it reflective since glass alone cannot reflect. The mirror, with a metal frame around it and a stand and screws so it can tilt, is also an aggregate. Everything, including the camera set—its stand, cables, lenses, plastics, steel, glass, and so forth—is all aggregates. There is nothing that is not an aggregate.

In the eyes of a buddha, an aggregate is empty. Hence, an aggregate is not an aggregate; it is merely called an aggregate. A human being is an aggregate, with many aggregates as its constituents. We have hair, eyes, nose, mouth, teeth, and ears, all of which are aggregates. They form an aggregate when they are combined, but once separated, the aggregate is no longer there. If your head were separated from your body, you would be dead. The eyes in isolation cannot see, even when the eyes are still eyes. Similarly, by themselves, the ears cannot hear, and the nose cannot breathe. Can the teeth chew if they are separate from you? No. They only function when they form an aggregate! Taken further and further apart, there will be nothing left eventually.

In this chapter, *The Concept of Aggregates*, Sakyamuni Buddha states that everything is an aggregate. Once an aggregate disintegrates, it becomes nothing. Likewise, when a person dies, they disintegrate and disappear.

But let me tell you, even while you are alive, you don't own "you." Everyone thinks, "I am me!" But the Buddha says, "You are not you, I am not me, and they are not them." Why? If you belong to you, then can you control yourself? No, you cannot. You want good eyesight, but as you age, everything looks blurry, your hair turns grey, and your teeth become loose. Is your body really yours? No. Even your teeth are not necessarily yours; bite something hard, and your teeth fall out; they are not yours anymore, and you will end up with dentures. The eyes are not yours either because you cannot control how far or how close you can see. Grandmaster Lu can still read small print; this is a clip from a newspaper. What about those of you who need glasses—can you read without them? So, are your eyes yours? They are not yours! Your ears, mouth, and teeth are not yours either. A few days ago, I had lower back pain and was wearing a support belt, but no more. Can you command your back to be pain-free? No way, your command is useless. So your back is not yours. As you age, degeneration typically starts from your knees, so the knees hurt. You command them to stop hurting, yet the pain persists, so you have no choice but to fix the broken parts. Don't think that your body belongs to you! You are just an aggregate!

This is the concept Sakyamuni Buddha teaches in this chapter. Any aggregate will disappear once it falls apart. Such is the case with the Earth too; when it disintegrates, it will disappear. When the three-thousand-great-thousand-world dissolves, everything will vanish.

Thus, Sakyamuni Buddha said,

“Subhuti, the so-called aggregate is unspeakable. However, mundane beings grasp and cling onto it.”

Greed is human nature, but the Buddha reminds us not to grasp anything because even our body does not belong to us. What are you greedy for? Reading this passage reminded me of when I donated 750,000 US dollars to the Sheng-Yen Lu Foundation, and I felt a tinge of reluctance in my heart. Clinging was inappropriate since I don't use much money anyway; all I buy is gas and water. The money is not mine unless I use it, so what is the problem with giving it away? With this mindset, one becomes more broad-minded. What is truly yours?

You might think since I'm wearing this necklace, it's mine. Sure, it belongs to me—and not Shimu—as it is a precious offering for me from my disciple, but does it truly belong to me? It's only for me to use temporarily—for a few decades at most. I am fully aware of this. I have not been wearing it and have just kept it in the safe deposit box. One day when my four elements disintegrate, will I still own it? No. It'll be sitting there in the deposit box. Who will own it next? Whoever owns it next won't own it either. Having this understanding, I decided just to enjoy it and be happy. Why not enjoy it for the moment while knowing that ultimately, it does not belong to me.

Do you think your wife is yours? Let me tell you, no! Everybody thinks, “This beautiful wife is mine.” No, she is not yours. One day when you die, your young wife will marry someone else. Nothing lasts forever in the world. Yet, as Sakyamuni Buddha says, *“Mundane beings grasp and cling onto it.”*

People who do not understand the concept of the *Vajra Sutra* believe that they own things. But I never think that this necklace is mine. Neither is this watch, which is engraved with my name. It has my name on it, so it must be mine, right? This is a Sheng-Yen brand Rolex. They covered “Rolex” with a gold leaf and replaced it with my signature. “Sheng-Yen” is also engraved onto this bracelet, so it must be mine. Remember to include them in my cremation. [laughs] But they can't burn, even after I have become ashes. Even if your name is engraved on them, they aren't yours. They're just for you to wear and enjoy for a few years. Money, houses, cars: none of these things are yours. They are mere aggregates. You are an aggregate, too. The Earth and the three-thousand-great-thousand-world are all aggregates. But mundane beings don't understand the concept of aggregate, so they still concern themselves with their belongings. They really should not!

Look at the Ukraine-Russia war. One might think that by occupying a city, one owns it. It's foolish to have such a mindset and get attached to it. In our eyes, it's all just a game. If mundane beings have the wisdom of the tathagatas, they will realize that everything is just an aggregate. Alas, they are ignorant, so they believe their belongings are theirs. So foolish!

Look at Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty or the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty! They really liked being emperors, so they wanted eternal life. Emperor Wu took an immortality elixir, while the First Emperor sent Xu Fu abroad with three thousand boys and three thousand girls to search

for an elixir of life. After conquering so many territories and becoming the most powerful emperor of the Han dynasty, he wanted immortality. But he still died. He consumed so many immortality elixirs prepared by the Taoist priests in his quest to become immortal. However, there is no such thing!

Sakyamuni Buddha has stated it clearly that everything is an aggregate, yet everybody is still grasping onto it. Due to greed, mundane beings are desirous of all things that are mere aggregates.

The less a spiritual cultivator desires, the better. Be simple and humble, free from any aggression or hostility. Spiritual cultivators can always be at peace and at ease, quieting themselves with no thoughts whatsoever and taking everything lightly, because they have no desire. If you have no desire, you will have no thoughts. Conversely, if you still have thoughts of desire, how can you be in a state of no-thought?

The *True Buddha Sutra* states:

...the state of no-thought is the key to attaining the right realization of the buddha jewel.¹

Your buddhanature will emerge in the state of no-thought—when all thoughts have been emptied, without any thoughts arising in the mind. This is true attainment.

The Buddha teaches us to cultivate spiritually this way. You need to first understand the concept and then apply it. Only without greed or desire will you be able to reach the state of no-thought. Do you still have desires upon realizing that the body does not even belong to you?

Listen attentively to what the *Vajra Sutra* is stating. Eliminate greed, desire, and grasping for aggregates. Mundane beings desire aggregates—houses, cars, gold, diamonds, jewels, looks, beauty, and more. They want to remain beautiful, but instead, they become older and older until everything eventually dissipates. Once you are cremated, there is nothing left but emptiness. At such a time, where will greed be? Having said that, greed and desire still exist for the deceased and bardo spirits.

Only by understanding this concept will they be free from any desire and grasping. In such a case, one will be able to manifest one's own buddhanature, beaming the most brilliant clear-light radiance.

Om mani padme hum.

¹ The *True Buddha Sutra* states, "In cultivation, the key to realizing the Buddha Jewel Sambodhi is a quiescent mind; that of realizing the Dharma Jewel is purity of body, speech, and mind; that of realizing the Sangha Jewel is refuge in a True Buddha Guru."

31 Unborn Perception

“Subhuti, if someone claims that the Buddha ever speaks on the perception of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan, do you think they understand my teaching?”

“No, World-Honored One! This person does not understand your teaching. Why? Because the World-Honored One says, ‘A perception of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan is not a perception of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan; it is merely called a perception of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan.’”

“Subhuti, the one generating anuttara samyaksambodhi should know, perceive, believe, and understand that everything is as such, and therefore, should not give rise to any dharma phenomena.

“Subhuti, the Tathagata says that the so-called dharma phenomena are not dharma phenomena; they are merely called dharma phenomena.”

The only way to attain the clear-light radiance of buddhanature
is through purification.

Discourse 78

April 24, 2022

Chapter thirty-one discusses *Unborn Perception*. Earlier we talked about the entire universe and everything in it as an aggregate. Anything you see is a mere aggregate, and nothing is there once it is taken apart. An aggregate is without self-nature and has no reality; it lacks true-nature. So are all phenomena; they lack self-nature and true-nature. Everything that is perceived has no true-nature. Whatever you see and know has no true reality because the whole universe is an aggregate of aggregates. Thus, it is unborn. By now, you should understand this chapter on unborn perception.

During homa, I always wave this peacock feather fan three times, right? [Grandmaster waves the dharma implement.] Do you know what I write on it [invisibly] and what I chant while employing it? If you can guess correctly, I will give you this gold ring I am wearing! It's covered with gemstones and diamonds, and it'll be yours if you correctly guess what I say each time I wave the fan. And I will have no regrets. Does anybody know? Your answer must be exact, without missing a word. [Grandmaster repeats some answers from the audience,] "*Om ah hum, hum hum hum, lang yang kang.*" Okay, the case is closed; the ring stays with me. [laughs] I knew nobody would know, so I made this bet. I didn't offer the necklace—which is much more precious—because if I did, everyone would raise their hands. The gold ring is still valuable, covered in gemstones and diamonds. Unfortunately, nobody gets it.

The first time I wave the fan, I say, "Purify." The second time, I add two [Chinese] characters to the first phrase to become "purify self-nature." The third time, I add two additional [Chinese] characters, "purify all self-natures."¹

Truly, these are the three statements I chant during homa: "Purify! Purify self-nature! Purify all self-natures!" I perform homa to purify. By purifying all impurities, not only is the homa pure, but self-nature also becomes pure. Lastly, all of our self-natures (buddhanature) also become pure.

Everything is an aggregate, but taken apart, it has no self-nature and no true reality. Like I said the other day: separated from the body, the eyes cannot see, the ears cannot hear, and the teeth

¹ The number of the Chinese characters in the recitation does not necessarily correspond to the number of words in the English translation.

cannot eat. They can only function when they are part of the aggregate, but not otherwise. So, once they completely come apart, is there anything remaining? Buddhanature. You are purified by being constantly mindful of how everything is after it comes apart.

Hence the Buddha said,

“Subhuti, if someone claims that the Buddha ever speaks on the perception of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan, do you think they understand my teaching?”

There is no such thing as perception, so the Buddha did not speak it. Subhuti replied,

“No, World-Honored One! This person does not understand your teaching. Why? Because the World-Honored One says, ‘A perception of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan is not a perception of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan; it is merely called a perception of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan.’”

Although the perception of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan is not it, mundane beings experience it. Due to this, the perception of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan exists.

“Subhuti, the one generating anuttara samyaksambodhi should know, perceive, believe, and understand that everything is as such, and therefore, should not give rise to any dharma phenomena.”

In fact, everything is nonexistent—empty!

“Subhuti, the Tathagata says that the so-called dharma phenomena are not dharma phenomena; they are merely called dharma phenomena.”

What are the so-called *dharma phenomena*? They are everything you perceive and know in the entire universe, and they are nonexistent—unborn. According to the Tathagata, *dharma phenomena are not dharma phenomena* because they have no true reality. Yet mundane beings think they exist and thus give rise to dharma phenomena (all kinds of phenomena). Whatever mundane beings see are aggregates, but the Buddha sees them as nonexistent.

The only true reality is buddhanature! Buddhanature appears upon complete purification. Hence, I say, “Purify!” In the *High King Sutra*, there is also the Pure Buddha. Master Thubten Dargye’s last word was “purity.” Once you are purified, pure self-nature will manifest. “All self-natures purified” is when the self-natures of all sentient beings have been completely purified.

Even though the dharma we are practicing is also false, we can be purified by practicing dharma. To what extent have you been purified? According to *Lamdre*, a purity scale of thirteen means one has reached the thirteenth ground—a buddha. Adharma Buddha has a purity scale of sixteen, reaching the sixteenth ground, the ground of the primordial buddha. These are represented by “purity.” The same principle applies to the bodhisattvas. The purpose of our dharma practice is to purify ourselves, level by level. This is how it’s taught in *Lamdre*.

Upon generating anuttara samyaksambodhi, a bodhisattva should know, perceive, believe, and explain that none of the phenomena have ever arisen; everything perceived is not real and has

no true reality. Self-nature or buddhanature—which emerges naturally upon purification—is the only true reality, and nothing else.

That is what this chapter is talking about. Others may not explain it this way, but this is how Grandmaster explains it. [applause] Next is chapter thirty-two—*All Manifestations Lack Reality*—which is the final chapter of the *Vajra Sutra*.

Let me tell you, even Sukhavati—the Western Pureland of Utmost Bliss—is just a manifestation, and so are all the buddhaverses and purelands. Nevertheless, Sukhavati is a realm whose inhabitants will never regress to the six rebirth realms. My wish is that everyone can rise to Sukhavati. Once you are reborn there, you can continue to purify yourself. In Sukhavati, there is purifying dharma like the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment, which most of you are familiar with. They include the four mindfulness, the four noble truths, the eightfold noble path, and more, for a total of thirty-seven points practiced in Mahayana Buddhism, whereas the Theravada tradition primarily emphasizes precepts, meditation, and wisdom to attain arhatship. To cultivate bodhisattvahood, one relies on the eightfold noble path and the six paramitas. When you have completed all ten grounds of bodhisattvahood, you become a “would-be buddha.” In the Mahayana tradition, you are a buddha when you reach the eleventh ground and above. This classification is based on the purity scale.

Sukhavati is very conducive to practicing the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment, which easily allows the attainment of buddhahood. Every being in Sukhavati will attain buddhahood upon fruition. I wish everyone will be reborn in Sukhavati and become a buddha through the practice of the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment there.

All purelands are manifestations. Sukhavati is manifested by Amitabha Buddha; World of Omnipresence by Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva; Jade Green Profound Pureland by Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva; Lapis Lazuli Light Realm by Medicine Buddha; and the True Buddha School, too, has its True Buddha Realm. All the great bodhisattvas manifest their own purelands.

Even though they are mere manifestations, once you get there, you can continue cultivating and attain buddhahood. The only way to attain the clear-light radiance of buddhanature is through purification. In other words, purification is necessary as you ascend, level by level, through the grounds of bodhisattvahood [all the way to buddhahood]. This is how it is!

Om mani padme hum.

32 All Manifestations Lack Reality

“Subhuti, in comparison to an act of giving that fills the infinite asamkya worlds with seven treasures, a good man or a good woman who generates bodhicitta and accepts, upholds, reads, recites, and expounds this sutra—even if it is only the four-line verse—will generate superior blessings.

“When one does not grasp onto any phenomena, one remains unperturbed. Why?

“Everything conditioned
Is a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow.
It is like a dewdrop or a flash of lightning.
Always keep this in mind!”

Upon completion of the Buddha’s teaching, the Venerable Elder Subhuti, bhiksus, bhiksunis, upasakas, upasikas, and all beings in the human, heaven, and asura realms experienced great joy, and thereafter, faithfully practiced according to what they had heard.

End of the Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra

Only buddhanature is real.
Everything conditioned and all manifestations are not.
They are illusory and fleeting,
like a dream,
a bubble,
a shadow,
a dewdrop,
or a flash of lightning.

Discourse 79

April 30, 2022

We have come to the final chapter of the *Vajra Sutra*, chapter thirty-two—*All Manifestations Lack Reality*. Let me say that everybody can easily understand this chapter, so I don't need to explain it further. Two rainbows appeared in the sky just now, and coincidentally, a video by Tbboyeh Foundation was also about my book, *Life is But a Dream*. Aren't they all related to this chapter?

All Manifestations Lack Reality means that all physical manifestations are not real. The Sakyamuni Buddha in the saha world was a buddha in a physical body (nirmanakaya). He was a physical manifestation and lacked true reality. Therefore, we cannot say that he spoke dharma. For this reason, Sakyamuni Buddha states that he has not spoken any dharma, even though he did.

Today you may say that Grandmaster Lu speaks dharma; it seems so, but in reality, he does not. This is because I am in a physical body, and all of you are also in physical bodies. All physical bodies are not real [as they are merely aggregates]. Therefore, there is no such thing as speaking dharma. The dharma itself is also not real; it is fundamentally false.

Tantric dharma is created by humans; they are mere tools. Humans define dharma practices—the beginning, main, and ending parts—including the four preliminary practices, the yidam practice, the inner practices, kriyatantra, upatantra, yogatantra, and the highest yogatantra, and all the stages in the Tantric Buddhist tradition. How did they come into existence? People created them for spiritual cultivation. They are all false—thus, dharma is false. The *Vajra Sutra* mentions that the so-called dharma is not real, let alone the non-dharma—it is, of course, false.

The Buddha states that all physical manifestations are not real. The Earth, the solar system, and the three-thousand-great-thousand-world are all false, as nothing is real. All manifestations lack reality. You think they are real, like the two rainbows today. They seem real, but of course, they are not! The same applies to human beings. We may appear real, but we are not. The whole Earth may seem real, but it is only an aggregate of the four elements—earth, water, fire, and wind. One day, when the Earth explodes or cracks, would it still exist? No. If the solar system explodes, will it remain? No. Not to mention human beings...

When you study geography or history, you will know that China has five thousand years of history. What about six thousand, ten thousand, or twenty thousand years ago; was there China? Of course not. Take the example of dinosaurs. The dinosaurs were also physical manifestations that existed long ago, as there are fossils. Now that they are extinct, where can you find them? We had a dinosaur at our Seattle temple—a costume worn by a dharma brother for performances. We knew the dinosaur in the show was fake as it was acted out by humans. Dinosaurs existed long ago but not anymore.

As of now, human beings exist. What about in the future? One day, they will no longer exist, especially if nuclear bombs were to be set off! In a nuclear war, the Earth will shatter, and humans and all else will be obliterated. Then in some distant future, some beings would say, “Long, long ago, there was a planet called Earth. It had human beings who looked like this. Now they’re all extinct.”

Aren’t all these false? These are examples that all manifestations are unreal, and everything is a manifestation. *All Manifestations Lack Reality* means that anything manifested is unreal. Everything lacks reality, not just the rainbows.

Let me finish reciting the sutra.

“Subhuti, in comparison to an act of giving that fills the infinite asamkya worlds with seven treasures, a good man or a good woman who generates bodhicitta and accepts, upholds, reads, recites, and expounds this sutra—even if it is only the four-line verse—will generate superior blessings.

“When one does not grasp onto any phenomena, one remains unperturbed. Why?”

*“Everything conditioned
Is a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow.
It is like a dewdrop or a flash of lightning.
Always keep this in mind!”*

Upon completion of the Buddha’s teaching, the Venerable Elder Subhuti, bhiksus, bhiksunis, upasakas, upasikas, and all beings in the human, heaven, and asura realms experienced great joy, and thereafter, faithfully practiced according to what they had heard.

That concludes the text of the sutra. Let me explain.

“Subhuti, in comparison to an act of giving that fills the infinite asamkya worlds with seven treasures, a good man or a good woman who generates bodhicitta and accepts, upholds, reads, recites, and expounds this sutra—even if it is only the four-line verse—will generate superior blessings.”

Asamkya represents time, and infinite *asamkya* means a very, very long time. Three great *asamkya*¹ is already an awfully long time, let alone an infinite *asamkya*. By adding the word “worlds,” it refers to the spatial dimension. This phrase refers to infinite time and space.

Suppose one performs an act of giving the seven treasures—which include the most precious things in the world, like diamonds, gold, coral, and all kinds of precious gems and precious metals—over a vast amount of space and time. They will obtain tremendous blessings from such an act of giving. However, a good man or a good woman who generates bodhicitta and accepts, upholds, reads, recites, and expounds this sutra—even if it is only the four-line verse—will generate superior blessings.

The four-line verse is the non-phenomena of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan. And a good man or good woman refers to anyone who generates bodhicitta. This means that giving dharma is far superior to giving wealth.

Let me rephrase: if you can uphold the non-phenomena of self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan, and if you can believe, accept, uphold, practice, read, and recite the sutra for yourself and expound it to others, then your blessings will surpass those of giving seven treasures over an infinite amount of time and spatial dimensions.

Why is it so? By not grasping onto anything or any phenomena, one can remain completely unmoved. Everything in this world is movable except for one thing. And what is that? The sky. It is immovable.

[Real estate property in Chinese is referred to as immovable property.] You may buy some real estate properties and think they are immovable, but they will move during an earthquake. So the immovable properties move, and the movable one is unmoved. [a pun] Mountains can be moved, and seas turned over by casting a spell. Even a mountain can move during an earthquake. Once, a mountain our office surveyed moved to another jurisdiction, so I lost a mountain—the whole mountain. [laughs] So they are not immovable.

The only thing that is truly immovable is the sky—cosmic space. Clouds, wind, fire, water, and earth—all of these are movable. Only cosmic space is immovable. Space is emptiness, so we use empty-nature to symbolize buddhanature. Buddhist sutras often state that empty-nature is buddhanature and buddhanature is empty-nature.

“...unperturbed. Why?”

¹ The term “three great *asamkya*” is often mentioned in the sutra.

What is the reason? How come one can remain unperturbed—unmoved?

*“Everything conditioned
Is a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow.
It is like a dewdrop or a flash of lightning.
Always keep this in mind!”*

This passage is also the title of my book—*Dreamlike and Illusory*.¹ Conditioned dharma—referring to everything conditioned—is like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, or a shadow. What is conditioned dharma? It is everything with conditions, including actions done with the expectation of getting something in return, say, for wealth, name, sensual pleasures, and the like. Everything conditioned has no intrinsic reality. There is a distinction between conditioned dharma and unconditioned dharma.

Billionaires like Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft near here; Elon Musk, the founder of Tesla; Jeff Bezos of Amazon; and many others have a net worth in the billions. But I know that none of their wealth truly belongs to them. One day as they age, they’ll know their wealth doesn’t truly belong to them. Billions of dollars don’t spare you from being sick; you still suffer from illnesses and eventually die. What remains for us is a square box in the Twin Lotus Realm Columbarium, but the box is not ours either. You stay inside an urn and might come out at night to scare people. [Grandmaster jokes] Then again, you won’t do that since Grandmaster won’t allow that to happen. In any case, if you’re ever frightened by ghosts bothering you, just go find Grandmaster Lu [to resolve it for you].

My son’s father-in-law—Sunny’s dad—died, and [his spirit] followed Sunny and Fo-Chi to America. They brought his ashes with them from Indonesia, and afterward he frequently came out at night to scare people, flying everywhere inside the house. Fo-Chi saw him sleeping in between Sunny and him; they were terrified, so they came for my help. Otherwise, they normally never come to me. [laughs] So I went to help them, and it was easy. First, I sealed all the windows and doors so he could not escape. Then, I chanted a mantra and called on him, and he appeared. I told him not to wander around scaring people and captured him inside a bottle. He has never come out again since. I told Sunny and Fo-Chi to just join their palms to him from then on. All is good. Now, where was I?

Ahh, I was talking about conditioned dharma and billionaires. Those who are after money will end up with nothing in the end; all is empty. Those who cling to looks will never succeed as they age. Didn’t I say that what is supposed to be hard doesn’t get hard when you’re old? Looks and wealth are empty, and name and fame even more so. What name? What reputation? Let me give you a simple example. Go to any African country and ask anybody there, “Do you know

¹ The English title of this book 如夢如幻 is *Life is But a Dream*; however, its meaning can also be translated as *Dreamlike and Illusory*. So we use the latter translation in this context to reflect the last verse of the *Vajra Sutra*.

Confucius?” Confucius is very well known, right? He’s a Chinese sage. But in a remote place somewhere in the depths of Africa, nobody knows him.

Grandmaster Lu has many disciples all over the world; he’s quite famous. But if you stand under the Tokyo Tower and ask any Japanese if they know Sheng-Yen Lu, they’ll tell you “*Watakushi wa wakaranai.*” I don’t know. You can ask ten or even a hundred of them, and none will know. Perhaps you think you’re famous, but are you?! You all think that Grandmaster Lu is famous, but what fame is there? How about you? It’s much less so, right?

“Everything conditioned is a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow.”

Everything only manifests and appears momentarily and will disappear eventually. My father’s name was Lu Ershun, my grandfather’s was Lu Chang, and my great-grandfather’s was Lu Dejie. What about Lu Dejie’s father? Do I know? No, because my dad never told me. I don’t know any ancestors before him. In the future, your grandchildren will be the same; they won’t know the names of their ancestors. So, what name are we talking about? Names are nothing.

It’s the same for country leaders. Let me ask you, how many African presidents do you know? Who is the president of Ivory Coast? Who is the president of Sierra Leone? Does anybody know? If you can answer correctly right this moment without checking on the internet, I’ll give all of these to you. So, nobody knows! See? So why do you still care for your recognition and reputation? Of course, everybody knows the President of Ukraine because he’s on the news every day. Before the war, if I asked you who the President of Ukraine was, you might not have known. A president is the most famous person in their nation, yet many people still don’t know their names. Only the people of their country or surrounding countries know. What use is a name? Think about it; what use is it?

Everything is just a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow, referring to the spatial dimension which has no reality to it. It is like a dewdrop or a flash of lightning, symbolizing the fleeting nature of time. Morning dew dissipates once the sun shines. Lightning disappears soon after it strikes. Dreams vanish once we are awake. Water bubbles burst easily, and once they do, they are gone.

“Always keep this in mind!”

You should think this way about everything in this world. With this mindfulness, your heart-mind will stabilize and become unperturbed. If you think everything is like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow, a dewdrop, or a flash of lightning, you will be unperturbed and unmoved. This is what the *Vajra Sutra* is teaching you.

Upon completion of the Buddha’s teaching, the Venerable Elder Subhuti, bhiksus, bhiksunis, upasakas, upasikas,...

Everyone knows the Venerable Elder Subhuti. We also know what *bhiksus* and *bhiksunis* mean: Bhiksus are ordained male monastics (monks), and bhiksunis are ordained female monastics

(nuns). Upasakas are male lay practitioners, while upasikas are female lay practitioners. They are the four groups of Buddhists—members of the sangha.

...and all beings in the human, heaven, and asura realms...

The heavenly realms consist of the realm of desire, the realm of form, and the realm of formlessness. The asura realm is part of the realm of gods and ghosts. People with strong jealousy and envy will go to the asura realm. Although they have some supernatural power, their strong tendency for envy, jealousy, and aggression causes them to be reborn in the asura realm.

...experienced great joy, and thereafter, faithfully practiced according to what they had heard.

End of the Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra

This is the end of the *Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra*!

[Grandmaster sings a song composed by a Malaysian disciple, and the lyrics is Grandmaster's poem.]

*Buddhanature is the ocean,
and human lives are the waves.
We wander and wander,
but eventually, we will return to the ocean.*

Om mani padme hum.