

FROM THE LANKAVATARA SUTRA

Translation: Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki

This sutra is said to have been given by Bodhidharma to his chief disciple Hui-k'e as containing the essential teaching of Zen. Since then it has been studied chiefly by Zen philosophers. But being full of difficult technical terms in combination with a rugged style of writing, the text has not been so popular for study as other Mahayana sutras, for instance, the Pundarika, the Vimalakirti, or the Vajracchedika.

The chief interlocutor is a Bodhisattva called Mahamati, and varied subjects of philosophical speculation are discussed against a background of deep religious concern. The topic most interesting for the reader of this book is that of svapratyatmagati, i.e. self-realization of the highest truth.

Some of the terms may be explained here: "Birth and death" (samsara in Sanskrit) always stands contrasted to "Nirvana". Nirvana is the highest truth and the norm of existence while birth and death is a world of particulars governed by karma and causation. As long as we are subject to karma we go from one birth to another, and suffer all the ills necessarily attached to this kind of life, though it is a form of immortality. What Buddhists want is not this.

"Mind only" (cittamatra) is an uncouth term. It means absolute mind, to be distinguished from an empirical mind which is the subject of psychological study. When it begins with a capital letter, it is the ultimate reality on which the entire world of individual objects depends for its value. To realise this truth is the aim of the Buddhist life.

By "what is seen of the Mind-only" is meant this visible world including that which is generally known as mind. Our ordinary experience takes this world for something that has its "self-nature", i.e. existing by itself. But a higher intuition tells us that this is not so, that it is an illusion, and that what really exists is Mind, which being absolute knows no second. All that we see and hear and think of as objects of the vijnanas are what rise and disappear in and of the Mind-only.

This absolute Mind is also called in the Lankavatara the Dharma of Solitude (vivikta-dhama), because it stands by itself. It also signifies the Dharma's being absolutely quiescent.

There is no "discrimination" in this Dharma of Solitude, which means that discrimination belongs to this side of existence where multiplicities obtain and causation rules. Indeed, without this discrimination no world is possible.

Discrimination is born of "habit-energy" or "memory", which lies latently preserved in the "alayavijnana" or all-conserving consciousness. This consciousness alone has no power to act by itself. It is altogether passive, and remains inactive until a particularizing agency touches it. The appearance of this agency is a great mystery which is not to be solved by the intellect; it is something to be accepted simply as such. It is awakened "all of a sudden", according to Asvaghosha.

To understand what this suddenness means is the function of "noble wisdom" (aryajnana). But as a matter of experience, the sudden awakening of discrimination has no meaning behind it. The fact is simply that it is awakened, and no more; it is not an expression pointing to something else.

When the Alayavijnana or the all-conserving consciousness is considered a store-house, or better, a creative matrix from which all the Tathagatas issue, it is called "Tathagata-garbha". The Garbha is the womb.

Ordinarily, all our cognitive apparatus is made to work outwardly in a world of relativity, and for this reason we become deeply involved in it so that we fail to realize the freedom we all intrinsically possess, and as a result we are annoyed on all sides. To turn away from all this, what may psychologically be called a "revulsion" or "revolution" must take place in our inmost consciousness. This is not however a mere empirical psychological fact to be explained in terms of consciousness. It takes place in the deepest recesses of our being. The original Sanskrit is paravrittasraya.

The following extracts are from my English translation (1932) of the original Sanskrit text edited by Bunyu Nanjo, 1923.

XVIII

Further, Mahamati, those who, afraid of sufferings arising from the discrimination of birth and death, seek for Nirvana, do not know that birth and death and Nirvana are not to be separated the one from the other; and, seeing that all things subject to discrimination have no reality, imagine that Nirvana consists in the further annihilation of the senses and their fields. They are not aware, Mahamati, of the fact that Nirvana is the Alayavijnana where a revulsion takes place by self-realization. Therefore, Mahamati, those who are stupid talk of the trinity of vehicles and not of the state of Mind-only where there are no shadows. Therefore, Mahamati, those who do not understand the teachings of the Tathagatas of the past, present, and future, concerning the external world, which is of Mind itself, cling to the notion that there is a world outside what is seen of the Mind and, Mahamati, go on rolling themselves along the wheel of birth and death.

XIX

Further, Mahamati, according to the teaching of the Tathagatas of the past, present, and future, all things are unborn. Why? Because they have no reality, being manifestations of Mind itself; and, Mahamati, as they are not born of being and non-being, they are unborn. Mahamati, all things are like the horns of the hare, horse, donkey, or camel, but the ignorant and simple-minded, who are given up to their false and erroneous imaginations, discriminate things where they are not; therefore, all things are unborn. That all things are in their self-nature unborn, Mahamati, belongs to the realm of self-realization attained by noble wisdom, and does not belong essentially to the realm of dualistic discrimination cherished by the ignorant and simple-minded.

The self-nature and the characteristic marks of body, property, and abode evolve when the Alayavijnana is conceived of by the ignorant as grasping and grasped; and then they fall into a dualistic view of existence where they recognize its rise, abiding, and disappearance, cherishing the idea that all things are born and subject to discrimination as to being and non-being. Therefore, Mahamati, you should discipline yourself therein [i.e. in self-realization].

XXIV

Further again, Mahamati, let the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva have a thorough understanding as to the nature of the twofold egolessness. Mahamati, what is this twofold egolessness? [It is the egolessness of persons and the egolessness of things. What is meant by egolessness of persons? It means that] in the collection of the Skandhas, Dhatus, and Ayatanas there is no ego-substance, nor anything belonging to it; the Vijnana is originated by ignorance, deed, and desire, and keeps up its function by grasping objects by means of the sense-organs, such as the eye, etc., and by clinging to them as real; while a world of objects and bodies is manifested owing to the discrimination that takes place in the world which is of Mind itself, that is, in the Alayavijnana.

By reason of the habit-energy stored up by false imagination since beginningless time, this world (vishaya) is subject to change and destruction from moment to moment; it is like a river, a seed, a lamp, wind, a cloud; [while the Vijnana itself is] like a monkey who is always restless, like a fly who is ever in search of unclean things and defiled places, like a fire which is never satisfied. Again, it is like a water-drawing wheel or a machine, it [i.e. the Vijnana] goes on rolling the wheel of transmigration, carrying varieties of bodies and forms, resuscitating the dead like the demon Vetala, causing the wooden figures to move about as a magician moves them. Mahamati, a thorough understanding concerning these phenomena is called comprehending the egolessness of persons.

Now, Mahamati, what is meant by the egolessness of things? It is to realize that the Skandhas, Dhatus, and Ayatanas are characterized with the nature of false discrimination. Mahamati, since the Skandhas, Dhatus, and Ayatanas are destitute of an ego-substance, being no more than an aggregation of the Skandhas, and subject to the conditions of mutual origination which are causally bound up with the string of desire and deed; and since thus there is no creating agent in them, Mahamati, the Skandhas are even destitute of the marks of individuality and generality-, and the ignorant, owing to their erroneous discrimination, imagine here the multiplicity of phenomena; the wise, however, do not. Recognizing, Mahamati, that all things are devoid of the Citta, Manas, Manovijnana, the five Dharmas, and the [three] Svabhavas, the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva, will well understand what is meant by the egolessness of things.

Again, Mahamati, when the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva has a good understanding as regards the egolessness of things, before long he will attain the first stage [of the Bodhisattvahood], when he gets a definite cognition of the ageless. When a definite acquisition is obtained regarding aspect of the stages [of Bodhisattvahood], the Bodhisattva will experience joy, and, gradually and successively going the scale, will reach the ninth stage where his insight is perfected, and [finally the tenth stage known as] Great Dharma-megha.

Establishing himself here, he will be seated in the great Jewel palace known as "Great Lotus Throne" which is in the shape of a lotus and is adorned with various sorts of jewels and pearls; he will then acquire and complete a world of Maya-nature; surrounded by Bodhisattvas of the same character and anointed like the son of the Cakravarti by the hands of the Buddhas coming from all the Buddha-lands, he will go beyond the last stage of Bodhisattvahood, attain the noble truth of self-realization, and become a Tathagata endowed with the perfect freedom of the Dharmakaya, because of his insight into the egolessness of things. This, Mahamati, is what is meant by the egolessness of all things, and in this you and other Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas should well exercise yourselves.

XXVIII

At that time, Mahamati the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva said this to the Blessed One: Now the Blessed One makes mention of the Tathagata-garbha in the sutras, and verily it is described by you as by nature bright and pure, as primarily unspotted, endowed with the thirty-two marks of excellence, hidden in the body of every being like a gem of great value, which is enwrapped in a dirty garment, enveloped in the garment of the Skandhas, Dhatus, and Ayatanas, and soiled with the dirt of greed, anger, folly, and false imagination, while it is described by the Blessed One to be eternal, permanent, auspicious, and unchangeable. Is not this Tathagata-garbha taught by the Blessed One the same as the ego-substance taught by the philosophers? The ego as taught in the systems of the philosophers is an eternal creator, unqualified, omnipresent, and imperishable.

The Blessed One replied: No, Mahamati, my Tathagata-garbha is not the same as the ego taught by the philosophers; for what the Tathagatas teach is the Tathagata-garbha in the sense, Mahamati, that it is emptiness, reality-limit, Nirvana, being unborn, unqualified, and devoid of will-effort; the reason why the Tathagatas, who are Arhats and Fully-Enlightened Ones, teach the doctrine pointing to the

Tathagata-garbha is to make the ignorant cast aside their fear when they listen to the teaching of egolessness and to have them realize the state of non-discrimination and imagelessness.

I also wish, Mahamati, that the Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas of the present and future would not attach themselves to the idea of an ego [imagining it to be a soul]. Mahamati, it is like a potter who manufactures various vessels out of a mass of clay of one sort by his own manual skill and labour combined with a rod, water, and thread, Mahamati, that the Tathagatas preach the egolessness of things which removes all the traces of discrimination by various skilful means issuing from their transcendental wisdom; that is, sometimes by the doctrine of the Tathagata-garbha, sometimes by that of egolessness, and like a potter, by means of various terms, expressions, and synonyms. For this reason, Mahamati, the philosophers' doctrine of an ego-substance is not the same as the teaching of the Tathagata-garbha.

Thus, Mahamati, the doctrine of the Tathagata-garbha is disclosed in order to awaken the philosophers from their clinging to the idea of the ego, so that those minds that have fallen into the views imagining the non-existent ego as real, and also into the notion that the triple emancipation is final, may rapidly be awakened to the state of supreme enlightenment. Accordingly, Mahamati, the Tathagatas who are Arhats and Fully-Enlightened Ones disclose the doctrine of the Tathagata-garbha, which is thus not to be known as identical with the philosopher's notion of an ego-substance.

Therefore, Mahamati, in order to abandon the misconception cherished by the philosophers, you must strive after the teaching of egolessness and the Tathagata-garbha.

XXXV

At that time, Mahamati the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva again said this to the Blessed One:

Pray tell me, Blessed One, about the attainment of self-realization by noble wisdom, which does not belong to the path and the usage of the philosophers;

Which is devoid of [all such predicates as] being and non-being, oneness and otherness, bothness and not-bothness, existence and non-existence, eternity and non-eternity;

Which has nothing to do with the false imagination, nor with individuality and generality; which manifests itself as the truth of highest reality;

Which, going up continuously by degrees the stages of purification, enters upon the stage of Tathagatahood;

Which, because of the original vows unattended by any striving, will perform its works in infinite worlds like a gem reflecting a variety of colours;

And which is manifested [when one perceives how] signs of individuation rise in all things as one realizes the course and realm of what is seen of Mind itself, and thereby I and other Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas are enabled to survey things from the point of view which is not hampered by marks of individuality and generality nor by anything of the false imagination, and may quickly attain supreme enlightenment and enable all beings to achieve the perfection of all their virtues.

Replied the Blessed One: Well done, well done, Mahamati! and again, well done, indeed, Mahamati! Because of your compassion for the world, for the benefit of many people, for the happiness of many people, for the welfare, benefit, happiness of many people, both of celestial beings and humankind,

Mahamati, you present yourself before me and make this request. Therefore, Mahamati, listen well and truly, and reflect, for I will tell you.

Assuredly, said Mahamati the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva, and gave ear to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One said this to him: Mahamati, since the ignorant and the simple-minded, not knowing that the world is what is seen of Mind itself, cling to the multitudinousness of external objects, cling to the notions of being and nonbeing, oneness and otherness, bothness and not-bothness, existence and non-existence, eternity and non-eternity, as having the character of self-substance (svabhava), which idea rises from discrimination based on habit-energy, they are addicted to false imaginings.

Mahamati, it is like a mirage in which the springs are seen as if they were real. They are imagined so by the animals who, thirsty from the heat of the season, would run after them. Not knowing that the springs are their own mental illusions, the animals do not realize that there are no such springs. In the same way, Mahamati, the ignorant and simple-minded with their minds impressed by various erroneous speculations and discriminations since beginningless time; with their minds burning with the fire of greed, anger, and folly; delighted in a world of multitudinous forms; with their thoughts saturated with the ideas of birth, destruction, and subsistence; not understanding well what is meant by existent and non-existent, by inner and outer, these ignorant and simple-minded fall into the way of grasping at oneness and otherness, being and non-being [as realities].

Mahamati, it is like the city of the Gandharvas which the unwitting take for a real city, though it is not so in fact. This city appears in essence owing to their attachment to the memory of a city preserved in seed from beginningless time. This city is thus neither existent nor non-existent. In the same way, Mahamati, clinging to the memory (vasana) of erroneous speculations and doctrines since beginningless time, they hold fast to ideas such as oneness and otherness, being and non-being, and their thoughts are not at all clear about what is seen of Mind-only.

Mahamati, it is like a man, who, dreaming in his sleep of a country variously filled with women, men, elephants, horses, cars, pedestrians, villages, towns, hamlets, cows, buffalos, mansions, woods, mountains, rivers, and lakes, enters into its inner apartments and is awakened. While awakened thus, he recollects the city and its inner apartments. What do you think, Mahamati? Is this person to be regarded as wise, who is recollecting the various unrealities he has seen in his dream?

Said Mahamati: Indeed, he is not, Blessed One.

The Blessed One continued: In the same way the ignorant and simple-minded who are bitten by erroneous views and inclined towards the philosophers, do not recognize that things seen of the Mind itself are like a dream, and are held fast by the notions of oneness and otherness, of being and non-being.

Mahamati, it is like the painter's canvas on which there is neither depression nor elevation as imagined by the ignorant. In the same way, Mahamati, there may be in the future some people brought up in the habit-energy, mentality, and imagination based on the philosophers' erroneous views; clinging to the ideas of oneness and otherness, or bothness and not-bothness, they may bring themselves and others to ruin; they may declare those people nihilists who hold the doctrine of no-birth apart from the category of being and non-being. They [argue against] cause and effect, they are followers of the wicked views whereby they uproot meritorious causes of unstained purity. They are to be kept away by those whose desires are for things excellent. They are those whose thoughts are entangled in the error of self, other, and both, entangled in the error of imagining being and non-being, assertion and refutation; and hell will be their final resort.

Mahamati, it is like the dim-eyed ones who, seeing a hair-net, would exclaim to one another, saying: "It is wonderful! it is wonderful! Look, O honourable sirs!" And the said hair-net has never been brought into existence. It is in fact neither an entity nor a non-entity, because it is seen and not seen. In the same manner, Mahamati, those whose minds are addicted to discrimination of the erroneous views as cherished by the philosophers, and who are also given up to the realistic ideas of being and non-being, oneness and otherness, bothness and not-bothness, will contradict the good Dharma, ending in the destruction of themselves and others.

Mahamati, it is like a firebrand-wheel which is no real wheel but which is imagined to be of such character by the ignorant, but not by the wise. In the same manner, Mahamati, those whose minds have fallen into the erroneous views of the philosophers will falsely imagine in the rise of all beings [the reality of] oneness and otherness, bothness and not-bothness.

Mahamati, it is like those water-bubbles in a rainfall which have the appearance of crystal gems, and the ignorant taking them for real crystal gems run after them. Mahamati, they are no more than water-bubbles, they are not gems, nor are they not-gems, because of their being so comprehended [by one party] and being not so comprehended [by another] - In the same manner, Mahamati, those whose minds are impressed by the habit-energy of the philosophical views and discriminations will regard things born as non-existent and those destroyed by causation as existent.

XXXVII

Further, Mahamati, there are four kinds of Dhyanas. What are the four? They are: (1) The Dhyana practised by the ignorant, (2) the Dhyana devoted to the examination of meaning, (3) the Dhyana with Suchness for its object, and (4) the Dhyana of the Tathagatas.

What is meant by the Dhyana practised by the ignorant? It is the one resorted to by the Yogins exercising themselves the discipline of the Sravakas and Pratyekabuddhas, who perceiving that there is no ego-substance, that things are characterized with individuality and generality, that the body is a shadow and a skeleton which is transient, full of suffering, and is impure, persistently cling to these notions which are regarded as just so and not otherwise, and who starting from them successively advance until they reach the cessation where there are no thoughts. This is called the Dhyana practised by the ignorant.

Mahamati, what then is the Dhyana devoted to the examination of meaning? It is the one [practised by those who,] having gone beyond the egolessness of things, individuality and generality, the untenability of such ideas as self, other, and both, which are held by the philosophers, proceed to examine and follow up the meaning of the [various] aspects of the egolessness of things and the stages of Bodhisattvahood. This is the Dhyana devoted to the examination of meaning.

What, Mahamati, is the Dhyana with Tathata for its object? When [the Yogin recognizes that] the discrimination of the two forms of egolessness is mere imagination, and that where he establishes himself in the reality of suchness (yathabhuta) there is no rising of discrimination, I call it the Dhyana with Tathata for its object.

What, Mahamati, is the Dhyana of the Tathagata? When [the Yogin], entering upon the stage of Tathagatahood and abiding in the triple bliss which characterizes self-realization attained by noble wisdom, devotes himself, for the sake of all beings to the [accomplishment of] incomprehensible works, I call it the Dhyana of the Tathagatas. Therefore, it is said:

There are the Dhyana for the examination of meaning, the Dhyana practised by the ignorant, the Dhyana with Tathata for its object, and the pure Dhyana of the Tathagata.

The Yogin, while in the exercise, sees the form of the sun or the moon, or something looking like a lotus, or the underworld, or various forms like sky, fire, etc.

All these appearances lead him to the way of the philosophers; they throw him down into the state of Sravakahood, into the realm of the Pratyekabuddhas.

When all these are tossed aside and there is a state of imagelessness, then a condition in conformity with Tathata presents itself; and the Buddhas will come together from all their countries and with their shining hands will stroke the head of this benefactor.

LXVIII

At the time, Mahamati the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva asked the Blessed One to explain concerning the deep-seated attachment to the existence of all things and the way of emancipation, saying: Pray tell me, Blessed One, pray tell me Tathagata, Arhat, Fully-Enlightened One, concerning the characteristics of our deep attachment to existence and of our detachment from it.

When I and other Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas understand well the distinction between attachment and detachment, we shall know what is the skilful means concerning them, and shall no more become attached to words according to which we grasp meaning.

When we understand well what is meant by attachment to the existence of all things and the detachment from them we shall destroy our discrimination of words and letters; and, by means of our wisdom (buddhi), enter into all the Buddha-lands and assemblies; be well stamped with the stamp of the powers, the self-control, the psychic faculties, and the Dharanis; and, well furnished with the wisdom (buddhi) in the ten inexhaustible vows, and shining with varieties of rays pertaining to the Transformation Body, behave ourselves with effortlessness like the moon, the sun, the jewel, and the elements; and hold such views at every stage as are free from all the signs of self-discrimination; and, seeing that all things are like a dream, like Maya, etc., [shall be able to] enter the stage and abode of Buddhahood, and deliver discourses on the Dharma in the world of all beings and in accordance with their needs, and free them from the dualistic notion of being and non-being in the contemplation of all things which are like a dream and Maya, and free them also from the false discrimination of birth and destruction; and, finally, [shall be able to] establish ourselves where there is a revulsion at the deepest recesses [of our consciousness], which is more than words [Can express].

Said the Blessed One: Well said, well said, Mahamati! Listen well to me then, Mahamati, and reflect well within yourself; I will tell you.

Mahamati the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva: said: Certainly, I will, Blessed One; and gave ear to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One said to him thus: Mahamati, immeasurable is our deep-seated attachment to the existence of all things the significance of which we try to understand with words. For instance, there are the deep-seated attachments to signs of individuality, to causation, to the notion of being and non-being, to the discrimination of birth and no-birth, to the discrimination of cessation and no-cessation, to the discrimination of vehicle and no-vehicle, of Samskrita and Asamskrita, of the characteristics of the stages and no-stages. There is the attachment to discrimination itself, and to that arising from enlightenment the attachment to the discrimination of being and non-being on which the philosophers are so dependent, and the attachment to the triple vehicle and the one vehicle, which they discriminate.

These and others, Mahamati, are the deep-seated attachments to their discriminations cherished by the ignorant and simple-minded. Tenaciously attaching themselves to these, the ignorant and simple-minded go on ever discriminating like the silkworms, which, with their own thread of discrimination and attachment, enwrap not only themselves but others and are charmed with the thread; and thus they are ever tenaciously attached to the notions of existence and non-existence. [But really] Mahamati, there are no signs here of deep-seated attachment or detachment. All things are to be seen as abiding in Solitude where there is no evolving of discrimination. Mahamati, the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva should have his abode where he can see all things from the viewpoint of Solitude.

Further, Mahamati, when the existence and nonexistence of the external world are understood to be due to the seeing of the Mind itself in these signs, [the Bodhisattva] can enter upon the state of imagelessness where Mind-only is, and [there] see into the Solitude which underlies the discrimination of all things as being and non-being, and the deep-seated attachments resulting therefrom. This being so, there are in all things no signs of a deep-rooted attachment or of detachment. Here Mahamati, is nobody in bondage, nobody in emancipation, except those who by reason of their perverted wisdom recognize bondage and emancipation. Why? Because in all things neither being nor non-being is to be taken hold of.

Further, Mahamati, there are three attachments deep-seated in the minds of the ignorant and simple-minded. They are greed, anger, and folly; and thus there is desire which is procreative and is accompanied by joy and greed; closely attached to this there takes place a succession of births in the [five] paths. Thus there are the five paths of existence for all beings who are found closely attached [to greed, anger, and folly]. When one is cut off from this attachment, no signs will be seen indicative of attachment or of non-attachment.

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