

Emptiness and Signlessness

XI. CHAPTER 11: EMPTINESS AND SIGNLESSNESS

A. AN INTRODUCTORY PASSAGE FROM SCRIPTURE:

At one time long ago, the Buddha was residing in the Karaṇḍa Veṇuvana bamboo grove together with the entire Great Assembly which was gathered together in a countless multitude. At that time, as the Bhagavān was sequentially explaining right Dharma, he told everyone in the Great Assembly:

“The dharmas proclaimed by the Tathāgata are devoid of any inherently-existent nature, are empty, and are devoid of anything whatsoever which exists therein.”

1. EXPLANATION OF THE CONCEPTS OF “EMPTINESS” AND “SIGNLESSNESS”

This is something which all inhabitants of the World find difficult to believe or understand. How is this the case? With respect to the form [aggregate], there is neither any state of being bound up nor any state of being released. Feelings, perceptions, karmic formative factors (*saṃskāra*), and consciousness, too, are such as do not involve either any state of being bound up or any state of being released.

Form itself is devoid of any characteristic signs and exists apart from any characteristic signs. Feelings, perceptions, karmic formative factors, and consciousness, too, are themselves devoid of any characteristic signs and exist apart from any characteristic signs.

Form itself is devoid of any thought [imputing its existence] and exists apart from any thought. Feelings, perceptions, karmic formative factors, and consciousness, too, are themselves devoid of any thought [imputing their existence] and exist apart from any thought.

The same is true for the eye and visual forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and fragrances, the tongue and flavors, the body and tangibles, and the intellectual mind and its dharmas [as objects of mind].

There is no grasping and there is no relinquishing. There is no defilement and there is no purity. There is no going and there is no coming. There is no “facing towards” and there is no “turning away.” There is no darkness and there is no brightness. There is no delusion and there is no wisdom. Nor is it the case that there is any “this shore,” any “other shore,” or any “abiding within the flow” [of

the river of suffering]. This is what is meant by "the nonexistence of any state of being bound up."

Because there is [in these phenomena] no state of being bound up, they are empty of any inherent existence. "Emptiness of inherent existence" is itself a reference to "signlessness." And even "signlessness" itself is empty. This is what is meant by "emptiness."

"Emptiness" is also just a reference to the absence of any thought [imputing existence]. The absence of any thought [imputing existence] is itself empty. This, too, is what is meant by "emptiness."

Any thought which even conceives of "emptiness" is itself empty. This too is what is meant by "emptiness."

In emptiness, there is no good and there is no evil, and so forth, even to the point that there does not exist any characteristic sign of emptiness either.

It is on the basis of this that one speaks of "emptiness." If a bodhisattva cognizes the nature of the aggregates, the sense realms, and the sense bases in this way, he straightaway refrains from indulging in any clinging attachment. This is what then qualifies as "patience with respect to dharmas."

Because the bodhisattva has realized this type of patience, he is able to develop that very patience which is gained at the time of the prediction [of eventual buddhahood].

2. A COMPREHENSIVE ANALOGY

Sons of the Buddha. By way of analogy, suppose there were a bodhisattva who, facing upwards, proceeded to write in empty space and then completely wrote out all of the twelve categories of scriptural text ever spoken by the Tathāgata. Suppose then that one then passed through countless kalpas wherein the Dharma of the Buddha so completely disappeared that persons seeking the Dharma would have no trace of it which they might either see or hear.

Suppose then that beings became so affected by inverted views that they created a boundless amount of evil karmic deeds, whereupon there came to be a wise man from some other region who, taking pity on those beings, searched widely for the Dharma of the Buddha. Next, suppose that, having traveled to this place, he observed the words written in space, noticed that the writing of the texts was distinctly clear, straightaway understood them, studied them, recited them, preserved them, cultivated them in accordance with the manner in which they were taught, extensively expounded

them, made detailed distinctions regarding their meaning, and by doing so thus benefited those beings.

As for this writing in empty space—are they such as one can either conceive of or describe? And yet he did indeed succeed in proclaiming [those teachings], passed them on, cultivated them, preserved them, used them to guide forth beings, and used them to influence beings to abandon the fetters which held them in bondage.

Sons of the Buddha, the Tathāgata has stated that at a time in the past, he sought the path to bodhi and succeeded in encountering buddhas numbering thirty-three *koṭīs* plus ninety-eight thousand. During that time, he was in every case a wheel-turning sage king who, using all manner of happiness-providing accoutrements, made offerings to those buddhas and to their assemblies of disciples as well. Nonetheless, because he retained [the concept of] something which might be gained, he did not then succeed in receiving the prediction [of eventual buddhahood].

Subsequently, he additionally encountered pratyekabuddhas numbering eighty-four thousand *koṭīs* plus ninety thousand. In this case, too, he made offerings of the four requisites to the very end of each of his lives.

After this had transpired, he additionally encountered six million, two hundred and one thousand, two hundred and sixty-one more buddhas. Throughout that time, he was in every case a wheel-turning sage king who, using all manner of happiness-providing accoutrements, made offerings. After each of those buddhas had passed into cessation, he erected stupas made of the seven precious things and made offerings to their *śarīra*. Then, whenever the next buddha manifest in the World, he respectfully welcomed him, and, offering encouragements, requested him to turn the wheel of right Dharma. In this same fashion, he continued to make offerings to a hundred thousand myriads of *koṭīs* of buddhas.

All of these Tathāgatas, even in the midst of empty dharmas, described the characteristic signs of dharmas. On account of retaining the concept of something which might be gained, he still failed during that time to receive the prediction [of eventual buddhahood]. And so it continued on in this fashion until he met Burning Lamp Buddha during the time when that buddha was flourishing in the World. He met the Buddha, listened to the Dharma, and then straightaway realized the unproduced-dharmas patience. After he

had realized this patience, he then succeeded in receiving the prediction [of eventual buddhahood].

Burning Lamp Tathāgata, even in the midst of empty dharmas, described the characteristic signs of dharmas, brought across to liberation countless hundreds of thousands of beings, and yet had nothing whatsoever which he spoke and nobody whatsoever who he brought across to liberation.

When Shākyamuni Tathāgata came forth and flourished in the world, even in the midst of empty dharmas, he spoke of the existence of language and words and thereby revealed the teachings, benefited, and delighted [beings], and caused universal acceptance and practice [of those teachings]. Still, there was nothing whatsoever which he revealed, nor was there anybody whatsoever who accepted and practiced [those teachings].

Both the nature and characteristic signs of those dharmas at that time were all entirely empty [of any inherent existence]. The writing was itself empty [of any inherent existence]. And so, too, was the person recognizing them also empty [of any inherent existence]. The person explaining them was himself empty. And so, too, was anyone comprehending them also empty.

From their very origin on forward, they were all empty. So, too, are they empty in the future and so, too, are they empty in the present. Even so, the bodhisattvas continue to accumulate the myriad sorts of goodness, this on account of the power of their skillful means. They remain intensely diligent and unrelenting in their perfect fulfillment of their stock of merit and in their [progressing towards] realization of *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*.

This is truly an extremely difficult endeavor which is inconceivable and indescribable: Even in the midst of nonexistent dharmas, there continues to be the description of the characteristic signs of dharmas. And even in the midst of there being nothing whatsoever to be gained, one speaks of the existence of dharmas associated with gain.

Matters of this sort are the exclusive domain of the Buddhas who, when they employ their incalculably vast wisdom, are only then able to succeed in comprehending them. This is not something one can succeed in knowing solely through contemplative thought.

B. FAITH-BASED PATIENCE AND ITS ROLE IN REALIZING FRUITS OF THE PATH

The bodhisattva who has newly generated the resolve sincerely reveres, is fond of, and delights in bodhi. Based on his faith in the

discourses of the Buddha, he gradually becomes able to succeed in gaining entry to it.

What then is meant by “faith”? When, equipped with faith, one contemplates the four truths, one then proceeds to eliminate the afflictions, false views, and fetters and then finally succeeds in realizing arhatship. When, equipped with faith, one contemplates the twelve causes and conditions, one proceeds to extinguish ignorance’s production of actions and then finally succeeds in realizing pratyekabuddhahood. When, equipped with faith, one proceeds to cultivate the four immeasurable minds and the six *pāramitās*, one then finally succeeds in realizing *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*. This is what is known as “patience rooted in faith.”

C. ACQUIESCENCE-BASED PATIENCE FROM PARTIAL COGNITION OF NON-SELF

Throughout the time they have coursed in beginningless births and deaths, beings have grasped at phenomenal characteristics, have become attached, and have failed to perceive the nature of dharmas. One should first analytically contemplate one’s own person as consisting of the five aggregates which are only falsely designated as constituting a “being.” There is herein nothing whatsoever constituting a “self” and nothing whatsoever constituting a “being.”

How is it that this is the case? If a self actually did exist, then that self should be sovereignly independent. However, beings are constantly being invaded and injured by birth, aging, sickness, and death and thus they fail to realize any sovereign independence.

One should realize that there is no self. The absence of self is just the absence of any agent of actions. Not only is there no agent of actions, there is also no one who undergoes experiences. The nature of dharmas is pure, accords with reality, and constantly abides.

When one contemplates analytically in this manner but has not yet been able to carry [such contemplations] to their most ultimate point, this is what is known as “acquiescence-based patience.”

D. SUPREME PATIENCE VIA FAITH-BASED AND ACQUIESCENCE-BASED PATIENCE

After the bodhisattva has cultivated both faith-based and acquiescence-based patience, it will not be long before he will also succeed in realizing the most superior form of patience with respect to dharmas.