



3 *The Essence of Mahayana*

The Buddha then began, with the following words:

“Subhuti, this is how those who have entered well into the way of the Bodhisattva must think to themselves as they feel the Wish to achieve enlightenment:

I will bring to the unbounded liberation of Nirvana, the total amount of living beings, every single one numbered among the ranks of living kind: those who were born from eggs; those who were born from a womb; those who were born through warmth and moisture; those who were born through transformation; those who have a physical form, those with none; those with conceptions, those with none; and those with neither conceptions nor no conceptions. However many living beings there are, in whatever realms there may be, anyone at all labelled with the name of "living being," all these will I bring to total Nirvana, to the sphere beyond all grief, where none of the parts of the suffering person are left at all. Yet even if I do manage to bring this limitless number of living beings to total Nirvana, there will be no living being at all who was brought to their total Nirvana.

And why? O Subhuti, if Bodhisattvas have characterising attributes of the self, of man, of all beings, and acceptance of life-span, they cannot be Bodhisattvas.

Buddha begins by saying that the way of the Bodhisattva is to bring all beings without exception to Nirvana. He then details all these beings. There are those born from eggs such as birds and reptiles; those born from a womb, humans and other mammals; those born of warmth and moisture, that is

amoeba, insects and the most insignificant of creatures; those born of a transformation process such as butterflies from a chrysalis; those who have any physical form whatsoever and even those who do not, existing only in the minds of others; all those beings who may have or not have conceptions or have moved beyond all duality and have neither conceptions or no conceptions.

The Bodhisattva will bring this limitless number of beings to total Nirvana.

At the same time, if he should succeed in this, no beings whatsoever will have been brought to Nirvana.

To our discriminating mind, operating in the world of duality, this reads like nonsense. A Bodhisattva leads all beings to Nirvana, and when he has done so, he has not done so. It remains a riddle if we do not understand Buddha's meaning.

First we need to understand that Nirvana may be described in two ways. There is **sapadasesa** Nirvana, which is Nirvana while form remains. This is the situation of the Bodhisattva who remains in the world for the benefit of others. It is he who leads others to Nirvana, from which, through compassion, he excludes himself until all others are saved. He is in the world of karma although he is accepting of, and untroubled by its effects. The Bodhisattva has no thought of a being or a self, because he is in Nirvana while he still lives, where all thoughts of self are extinguished.

The other understanding of Nirvana is the more usual one. This is **Paranirvana**, the state of complete emancipation, where there is no form, understood as occurring at the end of human lifetime, when greed, anger and ignorance are extinguished and there is no longer karma or rebirth.

Buddha describes the four characterising attributes from which the Bodhisattva is free, but by which sentient beings are held captive. They are: ego, man, all beings, and acceptance of life-span. Our ego may be seen as the cause of suffering, this ego leads to seeing the ego in another person (man), giving rise to comparison and conflict. By extension, all other beings are seen as ego-entities also. Finally, as ego-driven entities, we accept the appearance of the mental and physical world as true and absolute reality, all of it existing within a certain time-frame, which we will call life-span. Accepting life-span means accepting that which has duration and can be measured by time. And yet, even a billion years has a beginning and an end, and is really just a number. The Sutra will teach us not to cling to words or numbers.

We will meet these four characteristics again as we study the Sutra. They are: ego, man, all beings, and acceptance of life-span. For the sake of brevity we will usually shorten the last one to “acceptance.”

Realistically, even a Bodhisattva cannot literally save all beings. But they, like us, have 84,000 selves within (a figure given by Buddha to denote a vast amount) who can be led to Nirvana. This is done by dropping these selves, which are illusory anyhow. Being seen as non-existent, they become the unborn which is the true nature of all things, that is, Nirvana. When all these selves are viewed as unborn, how can they be led to Nirvana?

Ultimately “bring living beings to Nirvana” means to bring the mind into a state of serenity because when there is a birth of a thought there is stress and anxiety. If we understand this, we see that Nirvana and Samsara (the cycle of birth and death) are one. Therefore we understand that living beings mean thoughts in the mind, not actual living beings.

All thoughts which arise are a birth. When a thought is dropped, it is the death of that thought. For example if we see a flower it immediately becomes a shadow in our mind. When we see another similar flower that shadow automatically emerges and that is the birth of a thought. When the thought is dropped it is once more the unborn, we may say that it has been led to Nirvana. There is no longer any shadow and therefore no beings are led to Nirvana.

Buddha has answered Subhuti's second question – How should those who have entered the Bodhisattva's path control their thoughts?

