

5 Understanding the Ultimate Principle of Reality

“Subhuti, what do you think? Do you think it is possible to see Tathagata in bodily form?”
“No, O World-honoured one! It is impossible to see Tathagata in bodily form. Why? Because what Tathagata speaks of as ‘bodily form’ is really not ‘bodily form.’
Buddha, assenting, said to Subhuti: “All characterising attributes are unreal and delusive. If you can see that all characterising attributes do not characterise, immediately you can see Tathagata.”

Now Buddha asks Subhuti if Tathagata can be seen in bodily form.

Subhuti rightly answers no. Buddha has said that seeing bodily form is not seeing Tathagata. The Buddha explains that the reason for this is because Tathagata is seen and comprehended when there are no characteristics.

If we see a mansion, the home of a wealthy man, or that man driving a luxury car, the man may be undeniably wealthy, but the car or the mansion are not the man himself. Likewise if we see a man in rags, we may recognise his poverty, but the rags are just rags, not the person who wears them. When it is said that Buddha never uttered a word, it means that words are not enlightenment themselves. Yet without the guidance of words, how can we come to the true self? Clinging to the body is perhaps the greatest cause of suffering. But still we need this body as we seek to find our true nature, it is what we have to work with, despite its impermanence and essential emptiness.

A Buddha image is in no way Buddha himself, though it may be used as a focus for the mind. The

Buddha is said to have lived around 2550 years ago. Historians argue about the exact date. But to see Buddha is not to view the historical figure of Prince Siddhartha or to be certain of when he lived or for how long he taught; what matters is seeing into one's nature, as he did. We cannot say that Buddha is alive or that he is dead. Certainly the man died long ago. Yet if we come to our true nature we see that we are close to him and to his teachings.

Form comes from emptiness and has no self. True nature cannot be seen from form. Every form should be viewed with the understanding that all is suffering, impermanence, no-self and emptiness. Understanding this is the end of suffering. We suffer because we mistakenly see form as real. Buddhas, sentient beings and all things which have form should be regarded as false, because form is impermanent, only a temporary getting together of elements. When we see that form arises from emptiness, and that form and emptiness are one, we see the unborn, we see Buddha.

A master was travelling with a group of students. They entered a village where they came across a dedicated kitchen shrine in the public square. It was composed simply of three bricks, but the villagers treated it with great reverence. On shrines such as these, animals were sometimes cruelly sacrificed, supposedly to appease the kitchen god.

When the master saw the shrine, he said, "Whence comes the power of this shrine? It's no more than a pile of bricks!" Then with his staff he struck the earth three times, and the shrine collapsed. The villagers were terrified at this blasphemy, and were sure that the god would wreak vengeance on the master, but instead he walked away unharmed.

When he and his followers reached the outskirts of the village, they were approached by an old man who prostrated himself before the master, who realised that this was, in fact, the kitchen god himself. "Thank you, master," he cried, "Now I no longer cling to my godliness and am free." As they moved on, the students told the master that they did not understand what had happened,

even though they had not left the master's side. "What is this teaching," they asked, "That the god understood and we do not?"

The master said, "I teach no form, no birth and no death."

The master treated this shrine with contempt, because he saw the mistaken, superstitious view taken by the villagers. Yet Buddhists, both lay and ordained, prostrate themselves before images of Buddha. Isn't this idolatry?

Why do we bow? If Buddha is not a God, if Buddhists do not worship, why then do monks, nuns and the laity bow low and prostrate themselves before images of Buddha?

Buddhism is not a way of blind faith. The Buddha was a scientist in the way that he searched tirelessly for truth, he was a revolutionary and an egalitarian in his rejection of the caste system and his insistence on equality between all people. He was the inventor of an unsurpassed spiritual path and a great and generous liberator in his selfless teaching of that path and the ways in which the path may be followed. We all have Buddha nature but we sentient beings have somehow forgotten. Buddha has remembered fully and is worthy of our reverence.

In fact, we commonly make a triple bow, called The Three Jewels, The Three Gems or The Three Refuges. We make this triple bow before and after meditation.

We make our first bow to BUDDHA and there are five reasons why we do so:

1. We bow with respect as he was the founder of the way that we follow.
2. We bow with gratitude for the teaching he has given us, openly with nothing hidden.
3. We bow in acknowledgement of that teaching, so that we may remember and practise.

4. We bow low as it is an opportunity to minimise the ego.
5. As we bow we are aware of our own Buddha nature and the fact that we are Buddhas to be.

Secondly we bow to DHARMA, the teaching and the practice itself in all its liberating forms. Thirdly we bow to SANGHA, the whole of the teaching community and the fellowship of all those who are following the path to enlightenment.

We should not worship any form, a statue or otherwise. On the other hand we should not ignore any teaching device; their purpose is to help us. There is a difference between blind faith and respect for Buddha's teaching.

