



## 9 One Form, No Form

**“What do you think Subhuti? Does it occur to a Stream-enterer, “I am a Stream-enterer?”**

**“No Lord, he is called a Stream-enterer, but he has not entered anything. He has not entered form, sounds, smells, touchables or thoughts. This is why he is called “One who has entered the stream” (leading to Nirvana).**

**“Do Once-returners or Non-returners think of themselves as Once-returners or Non-returners?”**

**“No Lord, because they do not think of themselves as anything. This is why they are called Once-returners or Non-returners.”**

**“Does an Arhat think, “I am an Arhat?”**

**“No Lord, because for an Arhat there is nothing which can be called “Arhat.” If an Arhat were to think of himself as anything, then he would cling to the idea of a self, a man, a being or an appearance. Lord, you have said that I am the Foremost of those who dwell in peace, an Arhat, free from defilement’ But I do not think, “I am an Arhat, free from defilement.” If I did think I had attained Arhatship, then the Tathagata would not have proclaimed, ‘Subhuti, the Foremost of those dwelling in peace, does not dwell anywhere, and it is because he dwells nowhere that he is a dweller in peace,’ ”**

In this chapter, Buddha refers to four stages of attainment. These are:

**Srotapanna** – One who understands impermanence, emptiness, no-self and suffering. Such a person

is described as a Stream-enterer. Actually, he may be considered as one who swims upstream. His task is not an easy one because he must swim against the tide of worldly activities and values as he abandons the things of this world and travels back to his true nature. A Stream-enterer may be born up to seven times more.

**Sakrdagamin** – A Once-returner, he is in his last but one rebirth.

**Anagamin** – A being in his final rebirth.

**Arahat** – One who has attained Nirvana while living; at death his existence ends. We may contrast this with the Bodhisattva who will not enter Nirvana until all suffering beings are also released.

Buddha now reminds Subhuti that he has stated that Buddhas are without the characteristics of ego, of man, all beings and acceptance. What of the Stream-enterer? Does he think of himself as a Stream-enterer? Subhuti replies that he does not. In fact he has not entered anything. He has not entered forms, sounds etcetera, and it is for this reason that he is called a Stream-enterer – because he has no idea of himself as a self, a being or a person. If he did, then he could not be called a Stream-enterer.

Once-returners and Non-returners are dealt with in the same way. They are what they are because they do not think of themselves as anything at all.

It is the same with the Arhat. Subhuti acknowledges that he has been described by Buddha as “The

Foremost of those who dwell in peace." (To meditate in full mindfulness is to dwell in peace.) And yet, even though he is an Arhat, he does not think that he has attained Arhatship. When we think that we have attained something, that something becomes real to us and controls us. Essentially though, it is not real. We see it as "mine," so it creates the self and the four characteristics. The notion of attainment is the self. In truth the Arhat dwells nowhere, and thus he dwells in peace.

It should be remembered that discussion of all these beings at various stages of attainment is just words. The Sutra expresses the true Mahayana ideal, that in fact, "no-one" attains enlightenment.

We cannot be free while we cling to habit, class and culture. While we do so we remain the cause of each other's suffering. When the mind abides anywhere at all, we are living in ignorance.

Consider the difficulties posed by language. There is no suggestion here that language is not necessary or that we do not need words to communicate, only that words can still be seen as emptiness, indifferent in themselves, until invested with meaning.

Vietnamese children who come to live in English-speaking countries such as Australia are often uncomfortable with their names. A common name is "Dung." It is not pronounced as it appears, but nonetheless, that's how it's spelt. With an accent it is a boy's name and means "courage." Without an accent it is a girl's name and means "pretty." Not surprisingly, then, for reasons of spelling and pronunciation, Vietnamese children often take western names.

*There was a Vietnamese man who lived with his family in a remote village. When his wife gave birth to their first-born son, the villagers asked him to name the boy. As he was eating at the time, he simply said "Eat," and the child was so named.*

*Next year he was resting when she produced another baby, and the child was named "Sleep."*

*The third was born when the father was in the bathroom when called upon, and the name given was "Shit."*

*All this is not as strange as it sounds. The people of the village were illiterate, and among such people children may be named according to their rank within the family – they might only be numbered, like objects. In this case they were named according to the father's momentary actions.*

*Fortunately, in this case, there was a school-teacher who had retired to the village. He was the only one with the power to know that simply by changing accents here and there, the meaning of the words could be completely changed, they did not even have to alter the spelling.*

*"Eat" became "Gratitude."*

*"Sleep" became "Language."*

*And "Shit" became "Idea."*

All these are respectable and honourable names in Vietnamese. To a non-Vietnamese speaker, the names before or after their conversion are equally meaningless. No-one but the teacher was aware that the names were inappropriate. The children were bright and, given the opportunity, were able to learn well at school which might otherwise have been embarrassing for them to attend. In this case, the teacher fulfilled the role of a Bodhisattva. We all have the potential to learn but sometimes we need the help of another whose insight is deeper than our own.

We read in the title of the Sutra that Arya means high. Only a word, but a word which for us has a particular significance. Really the Dharma is not high or low, it is simply the Dharma. Human beings vary. They may be simple or complex, educated or not. So the Dharma, while in essence the same, can be taught in different ways. This tradition goes back to Buddha himself, it is the way of Mahayana, which teaches the Dharma in different ways to different people, according to their ability and level of understanding. It is not that Mahayana is superior to Theravada or vice versa, they are simply different in certain respects. The aim of all the paths is always to drop the ego. This gives us clear vision. We can then see an issue or an event as it is, without prejudice or attachment. When we live this way, with natural contentment (equanimity) we have truly reached the other shore.

*When the King Le Du Tong asked the Thien master Huong Hai, "Sir, what is the point that Buddha and patriarchs want to make?"*

*The master replied:*

*"The swallow flies above the river.*

*The river reflects the swallow's flight.*

*She has no intention to cast a shadow.*

*The river has no mind to reflect."*

*The bird flies, the river runs and nothing more.*

