

have for their existence is the late second century CE when a number of Mahāyāna sūtras were translated into Chinese by Lokakṣema. Many Mahāyāna sūtras as we have them show evidence of a particular kind of literary history: an older core text is expanded and elaborated; thus the sūtras translated by Lokakṣema originated possibly a century or so earlier in India. Most scholars push the date of the earliest Mahāyāna sūtras back into the first century BCE, but the production and elaboration of Mahāyāna sūtras certainly continued for a number of centuries. For their part, however, the Mahāyāna sūtras present themselves as teachings which, having been originally delivered by the Buddha himself, were not taught until the time was ripe.

Modern scholars have sometimes sought to connect their production with particular areas of India (either the south or the north-west), but the evidence is problematic and inconclusive. Following the lead of certain later Mahāyāna writers themselves, some modern scholars have also sometimes traced the origins of the sūtras to a particular school of the ancient Saṅgha, namely the Mahāsāṅghikas; but more recent scholarship tends to stress the fact that Mahāyāna was not in origin a sectarian movement. Rather than causing a schism within the Saṅgha, Mahāyāna teachings were esoteric teachings of interest to small groups of monks from various of the ancient schools (see above pp. 56–8). Again, while earlier scholarship has tended to represent Mahāyāna as a movement inspired by popular lay religiosity and stūpa worship, more recent scholarship has suggested that we might see the origins of the Mahāyāna in the activity of forest-dwelling ascetic monks attempting to return to the ideals of original Buddhism.² Other writers have also connected the rise of the Mahāyāna with a growing cult of the book.³

The most important Mahāyāna sūtras can be conveniently grouped according to the characteristic ideas they expound:

- Sūtras setting out the stages of the bodhisattva path: the *Bodhisattva-piṭaka*, the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*.
- The ‘perfection of wisdom’ (*prajñā-pāramitā*) sūtras. These are among the earliest Mahāyāna sūtras, and of these the

The Mahāyāna

The Great Vehicle

The beginnings of the Mahāyāna

The production of Buddhist sūtras or texts claiming to be ‘the word of the Buddha’ is something that continued for many centuries after the death of the Buddha. Although different schools of Buddhism gradually developed a sense of defined collections of scriptures having the authority of the word of the Buddha, the notion of a fixed canon seems to have remained somewhat loose. As the history of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka and South-East Asia illustrates, even where there exists a defined canon it is quite possible for ‘non-canonical’ sūtras to continue to circulate and be used.¹ But around the beginning of the Christian era there began to emerge scriptures that challenged certain established Buddhist teachings and ways of understanding, and which advocated what is represented as a superior path of practice leading to a superior understanding.

The defining idea of the vision of Buddhist teaching presented in these sūtras is one that I outlined at the end of Chapter 1: the superiority of Gautama’s awakening to that of his disciples. Gautama’s awakening is characterized by the perfect development of *all* spiritual qualities, and as such it exceeds the accomplishment of his disciples. The path followed by Gautama is thus the *mahā-yāna*—the ‘great vehicle’—or the vehicle of the Bodhisattva (*bodhisattva-yāna*) ending in the perfect awakening of the fully awakened *samyak-sambuddha* as opposed to ‘the inferior vehicle’ (*hīna-yāna*), the vehicle of the disciple (*srāvaka-yāna*), ending in arhatship.

The dating of the earliest Mahāyāna sūtras, like that of all ancient Indian texts, is extremely problematic. The earliest firm date we

earliest is probably the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* or 'Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines'. The characteristic teaching is the 'emptiness' of dharmas.

- The 'ideas only' (*vijñapti-mātra*) sūtras. These sūtras introduce the idealist doctrine that the 'mind', 'ideas' or 'information' (*vijñapti*) alone is real. The most important early sūtra is the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* but its teachings along with associated theories are found developed in the next group of sūtras.
- The 'embryo of the Tathāgata' (*tathāgatagarbha*) sūtras: the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, *Lañkāvatāra Sūtra*, *Śrīmālādevī-siṃhanāda Sūtra*.
- Two sūtras of particular importance in East Asian Buddhism are the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkā Sūtra* ('Discourse of the Lotus of the True Dharma', commonly referred to simply as the 'Lotus Sūtra'), which expounds the notion of the 'one vehicle' (see p. 228), and the (*Buddha-*) *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (incorporating the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and *Dāśabhūmika Sūtras*), which develops the notion of the 'interpenetration of all phenomena' (see pp. 264–5).
- The 'pure land' sūtras: the smaller and larger *Sukhāvatī-vyūha Sūtras*, the *Amiṭyūr-dhyāna Sūtra*. These sūtras describe the 'pure land' of the Buddha of Boundless Light and become the basis for the Pure Land school of East Asian Buddhism.
- Meditation sūtras: *Pratyuppanna-buddha-sammukhāvasthitasamādhi Sūtra*, *Samādhi-rāja Sūtra*, *Śūraṅgama-samādhi Sūtra*. These sūtras describe particular meditation practices.

Such a list indicates only in outline the nature and scope of a few of the most important Mahāyāna sūtras. Let us now turn to the summary exposition of the ideas articulated in these sūtras and the related expository manuals or *śāstras*.

The vehicle of the bodhisattva

That all Buddhism has a bodhisattva path follows from the fact that all Buddhism knows the story of the ascetic variously named as Megha (in the *Mahāvastu*) or Samedha (in Pali sources) and

his meeting with a previous buddha, Dīpaṅkara. Megha could have chosen to become a disciple of Dīpaṅkara and followed the path to awakening, and thus become an arhat in that very life. If he had done so that would have been the end of the matter: there would have been no Gautama Buddha, only the arhat Megha. But he did not follow the path to immediate arhatship; instead he chose to practise the perfections (*pāramitā/pāramī*) and so eventually—many, many lifetimes, many, many aeons later—he became the *samyaksam-buddha*, Gautama. The reason for Megha's decision is that he was inspired by the compassionate ideal of the bodhisattva path: having become awakened himself, he would lead others to awakening.⁴ The traditional notion of the arhat is that he becomes awakened and then effectively disappears from saṃsāra; the bodhisattva, on the other hand, spends many aeons in saṃsāra perfecting spiritual qualities, and, in the process, working for the benefit of sentient beings; eventually he becomes a fully awakened buddha, but only when the teaching of the previous buddha has disappeared from the world. In choosing the path of the bodhisattva, Megha thus forgoes his own immediate release from suffering, as an arhat, in order to become a buddha and teach the path to the cessation of suffering to other beings.

This basic distinction between the career of the disciple and the career of the bodhisattva is thus presupposed by all Buddhist thought. But the earlier tradition tends to emphasize that as far as the fundamental liberating knowledge of the four noble truths is concerned the Buddha and his disciples are equal. But a gap between the Buddha and arhat none the less exists. We can trace in Buddhist literature generally an increasing tendency to exalt the figure of the Buddha and to dwell on the description of his incomparable virtues and superhuman powers; lists such as the ten powers of the Tathāgata and the eighteen special qualities of a Buddha are common to all Buddhist schools. But with a text such as the *Lokānuvartanā Sūtra* ('discourse on conforming to the world') the Buddha is seen less and less as a historical personality and more and more as a transcendent being who merely appears to conform to the conventions of worldly

existence.⁵ And the more this happens, the greater the opportunity for the suggestion that the attainments of his arhat disciples fall somewhat short of the complete awakening of the Buddha. What is characteristic of the Mahāyāna vision of Buddhism is the view that the attainment of the disciple falls so far short of full Buddhahood that it cannot be considered as a worthy spiritual goal; contrary to the traditional formula which states the arhat 'has done what has to be done', he or she in fact has further work to do. Thus for the earlier tradition, as for the Theravāda today, the normal route to awakening was considered the path of arhatship, and the heroic path of the bodhisattva an option for the few.⁶ The parting of the two ways of the bodhisattva and *śrāvaka* is illustrated by the traditional story of Megha. For the Mahāyāna, however, the path to arhatship appears tainted with a residual selfishness since it lacks the motivation of the great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) of the bodhisattva, and ultimately the only legitimate way of Buddhist practice is the bodhisattva path.

The traditions of Indian Buddhism that resisted the Mahāyāna vision continued to think in terms of three approaches to what was essentially one and the same final release from suffering, nirvāṇa: the path of the *śrāvaka* or 'disciple' leading to arhatship, the path of the *pratyeka-buddha* and the path of the bodhisattva leading to the attainment of the *samyak-sambuddha* (see above, pp. 32–4). The Mahāyāna sūtras express two basic attitudes to this.⁷ The first is that the path of the disciple and the path of the *pratyeka-buddha* do lead to a kind of awakening, a release from suffering, nirvāṇa, and as such are real goals. These goals are, however, inferior and should be renounced for the superior attainment of buddhahood. The second attitude, classically articulated by the Lotus Sūtra, sees the goal of the disciple and the *pratyeka-buddha* as not true goals at all.⁸ The fact that the Buddha taught them is an example of his 'skill in means' (*upāya-kauśalya*) as a teacher.⁹ These goals are thus merely clever devices (*upāya*) employed by the Buddha in order to get beings to at least begin the practice of the path; eventually their practice must lead on to the one and only vehicle (*eka-yāna*) that is the *mahāyāna*, the vehicle ending in perfect buddhahood.

From this perspective the difference between *hīnayāna* and *mahāyāna* is effectively the difference between progressive stages of the same path. This kind of understanding is expressed in the classic Tibetan presentations of 'the gradual path' (*lam rim*) to awakening.¹⁰ Thus even 'Mahāyānists' (people who accept the Mahāyāna vision) do not necessarily begin their spiritual practice with the motivation of the bodhisattva simply established in their hearts; they must first undertake various practices in order to arouse and cultivate this motivation in the form of 'the mind of awakening' (*bodhi-citta*): spiritual practice begins by letting go of the delights of this world, by arousing a sense of the pain and suffering of samsāra and desiring release; it is only then that the motivation of the bodhisattva becomes crucial.¹¹ That is to say, at the beginning of the path we are almost inevitably primarily motivated by the wish to rid ourselves of our own individual suffering; it is only as we progress along the path that we come to understand that, in fact, suffering is above all something that beings share in common; with the dawning of this realization we are moved by compassion and the desire to help others; our motivation for following the path shifts and we enter the Mahāyāna proper. The bodhisattva thus at once turns away from samsāra as a place of suffering and at the same time turns back towards it out of compassion for the suffering of the world:

And he who hopes for the welfare of the world thinks to himself: Let me undertake religious practice, that I may bring welfare and happiness to all beings. And he sees the aggregates (*skandha*) as like a magic show, but he does not wish to disown the aggregates; he sees the senses (*dhātū*) as like a poisonous serpent, but he does not wish to disown the senses; he sees sensory awareness (*āyatana*) as like an empty village, but he does not wish to disown sensory awareness.¹²

The Mahāyāna texts may emphasize that the motivation of the bodhisattva is quite different from that of the *śrāvaka* or disciple, but in practice the two paths are not so different: one develops essentially the same spiritual qualities, but to the perfect degree of a buddha. The bodhisattva's practice, like the *śrāvaka's*, consists of the development of good conduct, concentration, and

wisdom: he stills the mind by means of calm meditation and then turns the mind to insight. A new scheme of ten stages or levels (*bhūmi*) of the bodhisattva path, as set out in such texts as the *Daśabhūmika* ('On the Ten Levels'), is superimposed on the older map of five paths (see Table 7 above), giving a scheme of thirteen spiritual stages. As I have just indicated, the bodhisattva path is seen as beginning with a series of meditations aimed at arousing the 'awakening mind' (*bodhi-citta*). What is meant here is the arousing and establishing in one's heart of a genuine desire to become a buddha, and this is brought about by an awareness of the sufferings of beings. As a result one is truly affected by their anguish and deeply moved by compassion. The arousing and establishing of *bodhi-citta* correspond to the paths of equipment and application, and are thus spiritual attainments of some depth. With the 'path of seeing'—the point, on the path of the *śrāvaka*, at which one became a stream-attainer—one has reached the first of the ten levels of the bodhisattva path and begun the development of the six perfections (*pāramitā*): generosity (*dāna*), good conduct (*sīla*), patient acceptance (*kṣānti*), vigour (*vīrya*), meditation (*dhyāna*), wisdom (*prajñā*). This standard list of six perfections is correlated with the first six levels; an additional four perfections of skill in means (*upāya-kauśalya*), determination (*prañidhāna*), strength (*bala*), and knowledge (*jñāna*), are then related to the final four levels. The practice of all ten perfections constitutes 'the path of development' ending in the tenth level, the 'Cloud of Dharma', and the attainment of buddhahood; beyond is the path of 'one in need of no further training', a buddha.¹³

Thus whereas from the non-Mahāyāna perspective the path of seeing is the point at which the meditator sees the four truths directly and attains 'the stream' that ends in arhatship, from the perspective of the Mahāyāna path this path of insight is the point of establishing oneself on the first of ten levels that culminate in full buddhahood.

Reaching the first level corresponds to stream-attainment; at the sixth level the bodhisattva has reached the stage when he could attain the nirvāṇa of arhatship, but the journey to full buddhahood is not yet complete and he must pass on to the seventh level.

The bodhisattva of these higher *bhūmis* is a quite extraordinary being who works ceaselessly for the benefit of all beings. Born as god in the realms of the devas or of Brahmā, he in fact already has many of the powers and qualities of a buddha.¹⁴ Indeed according to some sources the bodhisattva already manifests created bodies which perform all the twelve acts of a Buddha (see Chapter 1) at the tenth stage:

At will he displays the array of the realms of all the Buddhas at the end of a single hair; at will he displays untold arrays of the realms of the Buddhas of all kinds; at will in the twinkling of an eye he creates as many individuals as there are particles in untold world-systems . . . In the arising of a thought he embraces the ten directions; in a moment of thought he controls the manifestation of innumerable processes of complete awakening and final nirvāṇa . . . In his own body he controls countless manifestations of the qualities of the Buddha fields of innumerable Blessed Buddhas.¹⁵

If this is what tenth-stage bodhisattvas do, then what do buddhas do? The short answer is much, much more of the same—such that one cannot properly begin to conceive of what buddhas truly do. Nevertheless it appears that we are to understand that at some point in the process—the repeated process of manifesting the acts of buddhas and carrying out their work—these tenth-stage bodhisattvas do actually become buddhas. But for the Mahāyāna buddhahood this final attainment occurs in the Akanisṭha (Pali Akaniṭṭha) realm, the highest of 'the Pure Abodes' (see above p. 118).

Transcendent buddhas

In the earlier tradition the Tathāgata, or 'the one who has gone thus', teaches the Dharma and at death attains parinirvāṇa or 'final nirvāṇa'. Although after death he strictly cannot be said to exist, not exist, both exist and not exist, or neither exist nor not exist, effectively he disappears from saṃsāra never to be seen again. The Buddha of the Mahāyāna, however, continues to be present and in some way active. Strictly, for all Buddhism, we cannot speak of a buddha as 'existing' in any ordinary sense, since

to exist in an ordinary sense means to be born as an individual being in a particular realm; Buddhas have precisely transcended the round of rebirth, so cannot be said to exist at a particular time and place as 'individuals'. For the Mahāyāna becoming a Buddha generally involves attaining what is characterized as the 'unestablished' or 'non-abiding' (*apratisthita*) nirvāṇa: on the one hand the knowledge of a buddha that sees emptiness, is not 'established' in saṃsāra (by seizing on birth as an individual being, for example), on the other hand the great compassion of a buddha prevents the complete turning away from saṃsāra. So ultimately he abides neither in saṃsāra nor in nirvāṇa.¹⁶ Thus, while it may appear that a buddha takes birth as an individual being like the rest of us, in truth he does not. What we ordinarily see here on earth, as it were, is merely a body created by the Buddha, a *nirmāṇa-kāya*. Where is the Buddha really?

In the process of following the path the bodhisattva gradually develops the ability to magically transform himself and the world around him for the benefit of beings. The Indian yogic and meditation theory generally recognizes the development of various powers (see pp. 185–6), but in the context of the development of the bodhisattva path the ability is perfected and becomes of a different order. In a sutta in the Pali canon the Buddha is described as having a body endowed with thirty-two marks. But these marks are obviously not marks of the Buddha's ordinary body that we normally see. They are the marks of a body gradually developed over many aeons by the practice of perfections. Again, various kinds of 'subtle bodies' are universal to Indian meditation theory. For the yogin his other body (even if more subtle), developed and experienced in the stages of meditation, comes to be more real than his ordinary physical body. So there is a sense in which the yogin gradually becomes this other body. For the bodhisattva the end point of this development is the 'enjoyment body' (*sambhoga-kāya*) of a buddha teaching the Dharma in a 'buddha-field' (*buddha-kṣetra*). This enjoyment body is closer to what a buddha really is and may, indeed, be seen by some; for the rest of us, we must be content with the grosser manifestations of the Buddha's bodies of magical creation (*nirmāṇa-kāya*). Yet

the enjoyment body is, again hardly what the Buddha ultimately is. What a buddha is in 'himself' is the *dharmakāya*. This expression originally seems to have meant that a buddha is ultimately the sum (*kāya*) of perfected good qualities (dharma) that constitute a Buddha. But the expression comes to be interpreted, at any rate in the Yogācāra tradition, as referring to the ultimate truth of the way things are: the eternal, unchanging truth perceived by a buddha, 'thusness' (*tathatā*).¹⁷ Buddhas in the world, *nirmāṇa-kāyas*, come and go, live and die, as Gautama did in the fifth century BCE; cosmic buddhas, *sambhoga-kāyas*, spend countless aeons teaching in their pure lands and manifesting *nirmāṇa-kāyas*; strictly *dharmakāyas* do not do anything at all.

For the earlier non-Mahāyāna tradition there can only be one buddha at any given time and we must wait until his teaching has disappeared for the next to arise. Previous buddhas, although recognized and the object of devotions and rituals, are, like the Buddha Gautama, doctrinally at least beings of the past rather than the present.¹⁸ Maitreya (Pali Metteyya), universally acknowledged as the bodhisattva who will become the next buddha, must already be far advanced along the path, but his time is yet to come. For the Mahāyāna all this changes; the notion of the *sambhoga-kāya* is developed and exploited, emphasizing that there must, in the infinite universe, be buddhas now teaching in their pure lands and buddha-fields.¹⁹ These buddhas—the 'unshakeable' Akṣobhya, the 'medicine' Buddha Bhaiṣajya Guru, the boundless radiance of Amitābha—and their lovely pure lands are accessible to us, through either meditation or rebirth. Moreover the Mahāyāna conception allows that numerous advanced bodhisattvas are now working for the benefit of beings—not only Maitreya, but also Avalokiteśvara, the lord who looks down with compassion, the charming Mañjuśrī, bodhisattva of wisdom, and the 'saviouress' Tārā.²⁰ Indeed, according to the Lotus Sūtra, Gautama, Śākyamuni Buddha, is still around.

The development of the worship of various buddhas and bodhisattvas is a feature of Mahāyāna Buddhist practice, and it continues especially in East Asian Pure Land Buddhism and in Tibetan Buddhism. Yet this development can be seen as a

continuation of the practice of the recollection and visualization of the Buddha and his qualities (*buddhānusmṛti/buddhānussati*), and the contrast with contemporary Theravādin attitudes can be overstated. While the Theravādin doctrinal position on the ontological status of the Buddha and arhats of the past (which, we should remember, includes the stricture that we should not say that they do not exist) remains, in practice the power of the Buddha Gautama is thought of as somehow persisting until the final disappearance of all his relics, which, it is thought, in the last days of the Dharma will spontaneously come together at the site of the Buddha's awakening and vanish (the tradition of *dhātu-parinibbāna*).²¹ The devotional cult of arhats is ancient, and the presence of the arhats is invoked in South-East Asia, and one whom many regarded as a twentieth-century arhat, Ajahn Mun, is described as meeting and conversing with the arhats of the past.²²

Emptiness (*sūnyatā*) and the 'perfection of wisdom' (*prajñāpāramitā*)

Mahāyāna sūtras see the motivation underlying the arhat's attainment as lacking the great compassion (*mahā-karunā*) of a buddha; of equal concern to the sūtras is perfect wisdom. Together, wisdom and compassion become the two great themes of Mahāyāna thought.

The 'Perfection of Wisdom' (*prajñāpāramitā*) literature evolved over many centuries and comprises a variety of texts, including some of the oldest Mahāyāna sūtra material. Edward Conze, a pioneer of the scholarly study of this literature, considered the oldest and most basic text to be the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* ('Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines'), which he dates from the first century BCE. Subsequent centuries saw the production of vast expanded versions, such as those of 100,000 lines, 25,000 lines, and 18,000 lines, as well as shorter versions, such as the *Vajracchedikā* and *Hṛdaya* (the 'Diamond' and 'Heart' Sūtras), although it now appears that the last, a text only

a few lines in length, was originally composed in Chinese and only subsequently rendered into Sanskrit.²³

In the century or so prior to the appearance of the Perfection of Wisdom literature, Buddhism had, in the form of Abhidharma, begun to evolve increasingly detailed and sophisticated theoretical accounts of the nature of reality and of the stages of the path to awakening. Central to the Abhidharma is the distinction between the conventional truth (that persons and selves exist) and the ultimate truth (that persons and selves are ultimately simply aggregates of evanescent dharmas—physical and mental events). The main teaching of the Perfection of Wisdom is that, from the perspective of perfect wisdom, even this account of the way things are is *ultimately* arbitrary.

Since we fail to see things as they really are—impermanent, suffering, and not self—we grasp at them as if they were permanent, as if they could bring us lasting happiness, as if we could possess them as our very own. Thus the cultivation of calm and insight involves breaking up the seemingly substantial and enduring appearance of things. Things—our very own selves, our own minds—are actually nothing but insubstantial, evanescent dharmas (see above, p. 190). Abhidharma theory and the associated meditations thus provide a way of getting behind appearances to a world that is quite different from the one ordinarily experienced—a way of easing the mind from the ways and patterns of thought it habitually uses to understand the world. So far so good, but the currents of craving run deep, and the habitual ways and patterns of thought are subtle and devious. Our minds have a predilection to the formulation of views (*dṛṣṭi/diṭṭhi*), to conceptual proliferation (*prapañca/papañca*), and to the manufacture of conceptual constructs (*vikalpa*); it is these which we tend to confuse with the way things are and to which we become attached. In other words, we are always in danger of mistaking our own views and opinions for a true understanding of the way things are. This danger—and this is the really significant point—may apply to views and opinions based on the theoretical teachings of Buddhism (the Abhidharma and the account of the stages of the path) no less than to views and opinions derived from

other theoretical systems. Perfect wisdom, however, is what sees through the process of the mind's conceptual construction and is not tainted by attachment to any view or opinion. In particular, it is not attached to the views and conceptual constructs of Buddhist theory: unwholesome and wholesome qualities, the levels of meditation or *dhyāna*, the stages of insight, the attainment of the Buddhist path, *nirvāna* itself, the general theory of dharmas. From the perspective of perfect wisdom all these are seen for what they ultimately are: empty (*śūnya/suñña*). That is, the conceptual constructs of Buddhist theory are *ultimately* no less artificial and arbitrary entities than the conceptual constructs of the ordinary unawakened mind which sees really existing persons and selves. The mind can grasp at the theory of dharmas and turn it into another conceptual strait-jacket. Thus the Large Sūtra can state that:

there is no ignorance and no cessation of ignorance . . . no suffering and no knowledge of suffering, no cause and no abandoning of the cause, no cessation and no realization of cessation, and no path and no development of the path . . . It is in this sense, Śāriputra, that a bodhisattva, a great being who practises perfect wisdom, is called one devoted [to perfect wisdom].²⁴

The teaching of emptiness should not be read, as it sometimes appears to be, as an attempt to subvert the Abhidharma theory of dharmas as a whole. After all it applies to the constructs of all Buddhist theory, including the Mahāyāna and, crucially, itself: there are no bodhisattvas and no stages of the bodhisattva path. Two points are of importance here. First, we are concerned here with the *perfection* of wisdom, how the world is seen by the awakened mind. Secondly the perfection of wisdom texts present what they have to say about wisdom not as an innovation but as a restatement of the original teaching of the Buddha.

The wisdom or understanding of ordinary beings becomes tainted by attachment to views and conceptual construction; this attachment manifests as a certain rigidity and inflexibility of mind; the perfect wisdom of a buddha is free of all attachment and clinging. In carving up reality into dharmas in the manner of the Abhidharma, we are essentially constructing a theoretical

'model' or map of the way things are. Like any model or map, it may be useful and indeed help us to understand the way things are. In a provisional or conventional way, it may actually correspond to the way things are. Some maps and models will reflect the way things are better than others, but they nevertheless remain models and maps. As such, none should be mistaken for the way things are. Thus for the Perfection of Wisdom, just as persons and beings are ultimately elusive entities, so too are all dharmas. In fact the idea that *anything* exists of and in itself is a simply a trick that our minds and language play on us.

The great theme of the Perfection of Wisdom thus becomes 'emptiness' (*śūnyatā/suñnatā*)—the emptiness of all things that we might be tempted to think truly and ultimately exist of and in themselves. To see any dharma as existing in itself is to grasp at it, to try to hold on to it, but dharmas are like dreams, magical illusions, echoes, reflected images, mirages, space; like the moon reflected in water, a fairy castle, a shadow, or a magical creation; like the stars, dewdrops, a bubble, a flash of lightning, or a cloud—they are there, but they are not there, and if we reach out for them, we find nothing to hold on to.²⁵ Some of these similes and images are older than the Perfection of Wisdom, and in referring and adding to them the literature is not so much suggesting that the theory of dharmas is wrong as that it must be understood correctly.²⁶

The term 'emptiness' is not new to the Perfection of Wisdom literature; it is already employed, albeit somewhat loosely and only occasionally, in the Nikāyas/Āgamas and the canonical Abhidharma texts to characterize the experiences of meditation, and the five aggregates and dharmas.²⁷ But the emphasis on perfect wisdom as that which understands emptiness becomes the hallmark of the Perfection of Wisdom literature and its philosophical explication by Nāgārjuna.

Nāgārjuna and the 'middle' (Madhyamaka) school

Nāgārjuna, who probably lived in the second century CE, is the father of the Madhyamaka or 'middle' school of Buddhist

philosophy. The Madhyamaka was to become one of the two great philosophical traditions of the Mahāyāna, but lest there be confusion let me remind the reader that a philosophical school of thought is quite a distinct matter from a division and grouping of the monastic Saṅgha (*nikāya*); in India the Madhyamaka was not and never becomes a school in the sense of the Mahāsaṅghika, Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda, or Sammatīya. In fact, as a Buddhist monk, Nāgārjuna was presumably ordained into one of these four main ordination lineages, though which is not known, and remained in that tradition for the rest of his monastic life. The Madhyamaka was a philosophical outlook that, like the Mahāyāna in general, would have crossed the boundaries of the various ordination lineages of the Saṅgha.

This philosophical school is named after Nāgārjuna's principal work, *Mūla-Madhyamaka-Kārikā* or 'Root Verses on the Middle', and refers to the way in which Nāgārjuna presents 'emptiness' as equivalent to that fundamental teaching of the Buddha, 'dependent arising', and, as such, as articulating the 'middle' between the extremes of eternalism and annihilationism. If something arises in dependence upon some other thing, as a dharma is supposed to, then how, Nāgārjuna asks, can it be defined in the manner that certain Abhidharma theorists want, as that which exists of and in itself, as that which possesses its own existence (*svabhāva/sabhāva*)? For if something is sufficient to explain its own existence, then it must exist as itself for ever and ever, and could never be affected by anything else, since as soon as it was affected it would cease to be itself. And if things cannot truly change, then the whole of Buddhism is undermined, for Buddhism claims that suffering arises because of causes and conditions and that by gradually eliminating unwholesome conditions and cultivating wholesome conditions we can change from being unawakened to being awakened. Thus the one who claims that dharmas ultimately exist in themselves must either fall into the trap of eternalism by denying the possibility of real change, or, if he nevertheless insists that change is possible, fall into the trap of annihilationism since, in changing, what existed has gone out of existence. Therefore, concludes Nāgārjuna, the

teaching of the Buddha is that everything is empty of its own inherent existence.

But Nāgārjuna was quick to point out that we should not conclude that emptiness itself is equivalent to the view that nothing exists; in fact those who see in emptiness some kind of annihilationism have a faulty view of emptiness, and 'when it is wrongly seen, emptiness destroys the dull-witted, like a snake that is wrongly grasped or a magical spell that is wrongly cast'.²⁸ It is not that nothing exists, but that nothing exists as an individual essence possessed of its own inherent existence. In particular, to see 'emptiness' as undermining the teaching of the Buddha is to fail to take proper account of the basic Abhidharma distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth. The point is that, for Nāgārjuna, the Abhidharma account of the world in terms of dharmas cannot be the ultimate description of the way things are; rather it still falls within the compass of conventional truth. The ultimate truth about the way things are is emptiness, but conventional truth is still *truth*, not conventional falsehood, and without it the Buddha's teaching is hopeless:

The buddhas' teaching of Dharma depends equally on two truths: ordinary conventional truth and truth from the point of view of the ultimate; those who do not perceive the difference between these two truths do not perceive the deep 'reality' (*tattva*) in the teaching of the buddhas. Without resorting to ordinary conventions, what is ultimate cannot be taught; without recourse to what is ultimate, nirvāna is not attained.²⁹

But nirvāna is not some 'Absolute Reality' existing beyond the phenomenal conditioned world, behind the veil of conventional truth, for again this would commit us to eternalism. Emptiness is the ultimate truth of reality and of nirvāna—it too is empty of its own existence, it is not an existent. It follows that nirvāna cannot be understood as some *thing*, some existent, which is other than the conditioned round of existence, saṃsāra:

There is nothing that distinguishes saṃsāra from nirvāna; there is nothing that distinguishes nirvāna from saṃsāra; and the furthest limit of nirvāna is also the furthest limit of saṃsāra; not even the subtlest difference between the two is found.³⁰

In emptiness, then, Nāgārjuna attempts to articulate very precisely what he sees as the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising and the middle between annihilationism and eternalism: emptiness is not a 'nothing', it is not nihilism, but equally it is not a 'something', it is not some absolute reality; it is the absolute truth about the way things are but it is not *the* Absolute. For to think of emptiness in terms of either an Absolute or a Nothingness is precisely to turn emptiness into a view of either eternalism or of annihilationism. But in fact the Buddha taught Dharma for the abandoning of all views and emptiness is precisely the letting go of all views, while those for whom emptiness is a view are 'incurable'.³¹

Tibetan tradition has identified two basic schools of thought in the history of Madhyamaka in India after Nāgārjuna. The first is the *prāsaṅgika* or method 'of consequences', exemplified by Buddhapālita (sixth century) and Candrakīrti. This involves drawing out the undesirable and contradictory consequences that follow from attempting to take up a philosophical position on some issue. The classic form of this method amounts to a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of four possibilities (*catus-koṭī*), that something is the case, is not the case, both is and is not the case, neither is nor is not the case. All four are shown to be untenable, and 'emptiness' follows directly from this. Thus, for example, chapter 12 of Nāgārjuna's *Mūla-Madhyamaka-Kārikā* tries to demonstrate the incoherence of maintaining that suffering is produced by oneself, that it is produced by another, that it is produced by both oneself and another, that it is produced by neither. The method is thus primarily negative, there being no attempt to adduce independent (*svātantrika*) positive arguments aimed at establishing the philosophical 'position' of emptiness. This alternative *svātantrika* method is associated with the name of Bhāvaviveka (sixth century).

The term 'view' (*dr̥ṣṭi/diṭṭhi*) becomes crucial for the Perfection of Wisdom and Nāgārjuna. The Nikāyas and Āgamas distinguished between 'wrong' view (e.g. that our actions have no results, that the self exists) and 'right' views (e.g. that actions do have results and that all things are not self) and recommend the

latter. At the same time these early Buddhist texts stress that the arhat transcends and is free of all views and opinions. What the Perfection of Wisdom and Nāgārjuna are concerned to articulate is that there is a level at which views in general—even 'right' ones—should be seen as a form of mental rigidity, a form of opinionatedness: that is, we become attached to our right understanding. Thus the awakened mind is free of all views—even right views; it simply sees that dharmas are empty, it simply sees the way things are; the unawakened mind grasps at or fixes upon particular conceptual understandings or verbal expressions. This does not mean that 'right' views are somehow wrong, only that theoretical understanding should not be confused with real seeing. Right views and opinions are ultimately merely devices to bring about perfect understanding itself; the theory is for the sake of understanding. That is, a buddha cannot strictly be said to hold the view, opinion, or belief that all dharmas are empty; strictly speaking he does not hold any views or opinions, he simply sees the way things are. That is, the mind that sees emptiness (as opposed to the mind that merely has a theoretical grasp) is free of any tendency to impose some sort of conceptual construct on the way things are. On the other hand, although we may be convinced by Nāgārjuna's argument and form the view that it is certainly true that all things are empty of inherent existence, nothing actually changes for us and our minds continue to grasp at objects of experience, whether physical or emotional, as if they were so many possessions to have or to reject.

Like the Prajñāpāramitā in general, Nāgārjuna's analysis has often been presented in modern scholarly discussions as subverting the whole Abhidharma enterprise. This is to simplify Nāgārjuna to the point of distortion. Nāgārjuna's discussion is couched in Abhidharma technical terminology and assumes a thorough understanding of Abhidharma principles of analysis. Nāgārjuna is not attempting to show that Abhidharma is somehow wrong, just as he is not attempting to show that the four noble truths, or any of the other categories of Buddhist teaching, are wrong. Rather Nāgārjuna is concerned with a particular Abhidharma issue, namely the ontology of a 'dharma': how is one to define what a

'dharma' is? What he wants to point out, by appeal to fundamental principles that all Buddhist thought takes for granted, is that a 'dharma' certainly cannot be defined as that which possesses its own inherent existence (as opposed to the conventional existence of the 'self', for example). An account of reality in terms of ultimately real, self-existent dharmas cannot have the status of ultimate truth but only conventional truth. In as much as it presents dharmas as representing the ultimate divisions in the analysis of experience, beyond which one cannot go, all Abhidharma tended to define dharmas as those things which exist in themselves (*svabhāva/sabhāva*). Nāgārjuna's point is that, on Buddhist principles, such ultimate divisions of analysis are always arbitrary and cannot be taken as referring to ultimate realities in themselves. Although he is not explicit, in presenting his critique of dharmas as 'self-existents', he seems to have in mind particularly the kind of ontology of a dharma we know from the works of the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika Abhidharma.³² This lays great stress on dharmas as the ultimate 'substantial bits' (*dravya*) of mentality or materiality out of which the world as a whole is constructed. For Nāgārjuna an account of the world in Abhidharma terms is perfectly legitimate, as long as we do not view it as an exact and final description of how things are; like the Buddha's teachings generally, Abhidharma must ultimately be seen as 'conventional', taught for the purpose of the abandoning of greed, hatred, and delusion.³³

The Perfection of Wisdom literature is Mahāyānist in so far as it privileges the path of the bodhisattva; likewise, on the evidence of the other writings usually attributed to him, the author of the *Mūla-Madhyamaka-Kārikā* seems to have been a follower of the Mahāyāna. But if Nāgārjuna is a Mahāyānist, this fact is entirely incidental to the philosophy of the *Madhyamaka-Kārikā*. In seeking to establish his understanding of emptiness, he appeals not to the authority of the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras, but to that of the discourses of the Buddha on dependent arising preserved in the ancient Saṃyukta division of the canon.³⁴ In fact neither the early Perfection of Wisdom sūtras nor Nāgārjuna seem to present their understanding of 'emptiness' as a teaching pecu-

liar to the Mahāyāna; that is, the understanding of emptiness of all dharmas is not seen as exclusive to bodhisattvas and buddhas but as the wisdom common to *śrāvakas*, *pratyeka-buddhas* and buddhas. Certainly this is how Candrakīrti, Nāgārjuna's seventh-century commentator, understood the matter. Thus for the Perfection of Wisdom and for Nāgārjuna, 'the emptiness of dharmas' (*dharmā-sūnyatā*) is not a further teaching, but something required by the logic of 'the emptiness of persons' (*pudgala-sūnyatā*). Self (*ātman*) and 'inherent existence' (*svabhāva*) are equivalents, only the scale is different: the doctrine that there is no substantial self underlying persons (*pudgala-nairātmya*) entails the doctrine that there is no substantial self underlying dharmas (*dharmā-nairātmya*); just as there is no ultimate unchanging 'thing' behind the label 'person' or 'self', so there is no ultimate, unchanging thing behind the labels 'greed', 'hatred', or 'ignorance', behind the labels 'non-attachment', 'loving kindness', and 'wisdom'. And this is what arhats and buddhas have always seen. Some Mahāyāna writers, however, did want to claim the understanding of the emptiness of dharmas as the preserve of the bodhisattva: arhats understand the emptiness of persons and thereby remove the obstacles that consist in the defilements (*kleśa-āvaraṇa*), but only buddhas understand the emptiness of dharmas and remove all the obstacles to full knowledge (*jñeya-āvaraṇa*). Thus although they abandon the defilements, arhats are still subject to subtle traces left by the defilements (*kleśa-vāsana*), which can cause, for example, an arhat to skip like a monkey, echoing a previous life.³⁵

Both the Perfection of Wisdom and Nāgārjuna understand themselves as explicating an understanding of the Buddha's teaching as originally taught by the Buddha, and in certain respects such a view of the matter may not be entirely unhistorical. The earliest Buddhist teachings place great emphasis on the wisdom of the arhat as transcending fixed views and opinions in a manner that is not dissimilar from the Perfection of Wisdom and Nāgārjuna. Moreover, non-Mahāyāna manuals that basically subscribe to the Abhidharma outlook share in significant respects a common understanding with the Perfection of Wisdom and

Nāgārjuna on these matters: certainly dharmas are ultimately ungraspable and evanescent; certainly the arhat's knowledge transcends all views, even right views.³⁶

Of all Buddhist thinkers, it is Nāgārjuna who has repeatedly captured the modern imagination. Modern scholars have presented his thought as prefiguring Kant (Stcherbatsky), Wittgenstein (Gudmunsen), and, most recently, Rorty and Derrida (Huntington). Other scholars, such as Robinson and Hayes, have suggested that Nāgārjuna's arguments employ a kind of logical sleight of hand and in places are simply logically flawed.³⁷ Hayes has also questioned his influence on subsequent Indian Buddhist thought, yet he remains a towering and legendary figure for later Chinese and, especially, Tibetan Buddhist thought.

'Ideas-only' (*vijñapti-mātra*) and the Yogācāra

The basic understanding of this tradition is that the world we live in—the round of rebirth or *samsāra*—is to be explained in its entirety in terms of the workings of the mind: the three-fold universe (see Chapter 5) is only 'ideas' (*vijñapti-mātra*).³⁸ The theories and teachings associated with this understanding are found in various sūtras, the most important being the *Samdhinirmocana* ('Unravelling the Mystery of Thought') and the *Lañkāvatāra* ('Arrival in Lankā'); they receive their initial systematic exposition in the works of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, such as Asaṅga's *Mahāyāna-Saṃgraha* ('Summary of the Great Vehicle') and Vasubandhu's *Vimśatikā* ('Twenty Verses') and *Triṃśikā* ('Thirty Verses'), *Tri-Svabhāva-Nirdesa* ('Exposition of the Three Natures'), and his commentary to the *Madhyānta-Vibhāga* ('Analysis of the Middle Path'), a work traditionally regarded as given, along with several others, to Asaṅga by the Bodhisattva Maitreya in the Tuṣita heaven. The work of these two thinkers was subsequently commented upon and elaborated in India by Sthiramati (sixth century) and Dharmapāla (seventh century), and in China by Paramārtha (sixth century) and Hsüan-tsang, who studied with Dharmapāla at Nālandā in the seventh century and later wrote the *Cheng-wei-shih lun* or

Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi, a commentary on Vasubandhu's *Triṃśikā* incorporating the views of various Indian teachers.

The teachings of this school in certain respects represent a reworking of particular Abhidharma themes in response to the Prajñāpāramitā and Madhyamaka teaching of emptiness. The *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* thus presents its own teachings as a third and definitive 'turning of the wheel of the Dharma', following the Buddha's provisional teachings of the four truths in the deer park outside Benares, and of emptiness in the manner of the Prajñāpāramitā.³⁹ That is, for the *Samdhinirmocana*, the presentation of emptiness in the Prajñāpāramitā is too prone to the wrong sort of interpretation by the unwary and needs further explication.

The Prajñāpāramitā and Madhyamaka point out that the logic of 'dependent arising' demands that dharmas cannot be thought of as the absolute, ultimate existents of the universe. In peeling away the conventional truth of the existence of persons and selves and seeing the underlying dharmas, we do not arrive at ultimate existents, but only at another, perhaps deeper layer of conventional truth; the ultimate truth is that dharmas too are empty of their own existence. From the Yogācāra perspective, however, this is to tell us what things are ultimately not, but it is to tell us much too little about what things are and, crucially, how they come to appear other than the way they are. Thus while Madhyamaka was primarily concerned to critique a particular analysis of the ontology of a dharma, Yogācāra returns to giving a positive account of the workings of the mind in terms of dharmas in a new ontological framework. As the name of the school indicates—Yoga Practice—its approach is perhaps especially based in meditation, and the writings of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu show a special interest in calm meditation. There are two basic parts to the account of mind given in Yogācāra: the first concerns the eight types of consciousness (*vijñāna*) and the second the 'three natures' (*tri-svabhāva*). Let us turn to these in turn.

Early Buddhist thought analysed consciousness as consisting of six basic types corresponding to the five senses and the

mind. Building on the traditions of the earlier Ābhidharmikas, Yogācārin thinkers give what amounts to a rather more complex account of the sixth, mind consciousness, focusing on what are in effect the deeper layers of the mind. The active or surface level of the mind continues to be seen as comprising six types of consciousness: our primary awareness of five types of sense data and our conscious thoughts, which for human beings are mostly related to the former in various ways. But underpinning these types of active consciousness are two further types of consciousness which are crucial in creating the world as we ordinarily experience it. The first is 'the defiled mind' (*kleśita-manas*), so called because it is afflicted with four basic defilements: the view of individuality, the conceit 'I am', clinging to self and delusion.⁴⁰ The object of this defilement, what the defiled mind in some way takes as the self, is the eighth consciousness, 'the store consciousness' (*ālaya-vijñāna*).⁴¹ Below the threshold of consciousness proper,⁴² the store consciousness is the particular repository of all the seeds sown by the defilements of a being's active consciousness; it is the result of a being's past karma, the accumulation of all past tendencies, strong or weak, to greed, hatred, and delusion; as such the store consciousness is also the condition for the perpetuation of these defilements in present and future active consciousness; it thus continually interacts with active consciousness according to the principles of dependent arising.⁴³ Of course, the store consciousness is not a self, a thing in itself; what, in our subconscious, the defiled mind takes for a self is merely an underlying mass of ever changing causes and conditions, arising and falling, but which none the less, as it flows on, maintains a certain pattern which gives it the appearance of relative identity. The store consciousness is thus the underlying basis and support (*āśraya*) of our conscious lives: the largely hidden heart of our personalities.

The world of experience has three different natures (*trisvabhāva*). Clearly something is going on: we have experiences. The problem, according to the Yogācāra, is that what we experience is ourselves as conscious subjects enjoying a world of objects that exist 'out there', independently from us. This is

experience in its 'imagined' (*parikalpita*) nature, for the world of experiencing subject or 'grasper' and experienced object or 'thing grasped' is in fact a world of unreal imaginings, of things that do not ultimately exist. Both the grasper and the things grasped are in fact ideas, pieces of information (*vijñapti*), thrown up by the traces and seeds deposited in the store consciousness. This is experience in its dependent (*para-tantra*) nature. The operation of the eight kinds of consciousness ultimately consists in nothing more than a flow of 'ideas' (*vijñapti-mātra*), arising in dependence upon each other.⁴⁴ By force of a long-standing habit—throughout beginningless *samsāra*—we have imagined in the dependent flow of 'pieces of information' a world of independent subjects and independent objects. But when, as buddhas, we understand the complete absence of the duality of subject and object in the 'dependent nature' of experience, then experience appears in its perfected (*nispanna*) nature. In crude summary, the imagined nature is the unawakened mind, the perfected nature is the awakened mind, while the dependent nature is the common basis.

As the realization of the Buddhist yogin at the culmination of the Buddhist path, the perfected nature consists in the non-conceptual knowledge (*nirvikalpakā-jñāna*) which is empty of any sense of experiencing subject and experienced object. Its attainment is marked by 'the turning around of the basis' (*āśraya-parāvṛtti*), a revolution at the very centre of one's being whereby all defilements are cut off, and the imagined nature is no longer imposed upon the dependent nature, which appears instead as the perfected nature. As a result of this 'turning around of the basis', the seeds in the store consciousness cease to function as the basis for the imagined nature.⁴⁵ What appears as the contradiction at the heart of reality is seen through: certainly the process of imagining the duality of subject and object exists, but since a subject and object are not in the end to be found, the process is empty (*śūnya*), and yet this 'emptiness' itself is something that is definitely found. The middle way is to be found in the way 'reality' is somehow existent, non-existent, and yet existent at the same time. Ultimately reality is thus characterized not as an absolute

'something' (either mind or matter), but simply as the way things are: 'thusness' (*tathatā*).⁴⁶

Modern scholars have disagreed on the question of whether Yogācāra constitutes a true philosophical 'idealism', asserting that the mind only is real and that the external material world is unreal. The argument essentially turns, as Griffiths has neatly put it, on the question of whether Yogācāra is primarily making an epistemological point (that all we have access to is mental representation) or an ontological one (that mental representation is all that exists).⁴⁷ Certainly Yogācāra starts from the premiss that the world we know, the world we live in, is strictly a mental world: everything comes to us in the form of 'information' or 'ideas' (*viññapti*). Apart from *viññapti* there is no world, there is no experience. Equally certainly it is saying more than that simply in practice, *de facto*, we are trapped in our own private mental world unable to know whether or not there is in reality an external world that corresponds to our ideas about it, to our perceptions of it. Yogācāra is not a doctrine of solipsism. Vasubandhu's *Viñśatikā* thus attempts to argue that, although objects do not exist out there apart from our perceptions of them, nevertheless similar past karma results in the sharing of common experiences in the present. But these experiences are simply the products of the workings of consciousness, amounting to the arising of similar pieces of information in different streams of consciousness. We are, as it were, dreaming similar dreams; and just as the pieces of information that come to us in a dream lack independent objects, so do the direct perceptions of our wakeful state:

Thus people are hypnotized with a sleep arising from impressions left by the habit of false ways of thought, and, as in a dream, when they see things that are unreal, so long as they do not wake up they do not understand their non-existence. When, however, they wake up by acquiring the transcendent knowledge which is beyond thought and opposed to that same sleep, then, by the realization of the purified ordinary awareness that is gained as a consequence, they understand the non-existence of the objects of the senses.⁴⁸

Yogācāra thus does not appear to be agnostic about the nature of the external world. Rather it claims to present an account of

how we construct our world out of ideas, of how this causes us suffering, and of how we can turn this process around and escape from suffering. In other words, like all Buddhism it presents us with an account of the four truths. Yogācāra denies the ultimate independent existence of a separate experiencing subject on the one hand and another separate world 'out there' of experienced objects. That the world appears like this is an illusion constructed out of consciousness; or mind. But this is not to be taken as saying that I, the experiencing subject, somehow exist as my mind, my consciousness, while the external world of objects does not exist. It is precisely both that are ultimately fictions, illusions—'ideas' (*viññapti*) fabricated by mind. True, Yogācāra privileges 'mind' or 'consciousness' in so far as it is the operation of the mind that brings about the illusion of the duality of subject and object. But 'mind' that is not an experiencer or enjoyer of external objects is not exactly mind as we ordinarily understand it. For Yogācāra, as for all Buddhist thought, it is the way things are rather than *what* actually is, that is crucial: the truth underlying reality is 'thusness' (*tathatā*).

In many ways Yogācāra represents the culmination of the north Indian Buddhist intellectual tradition. Its treatises set forth a full psychological theory (which represents a reworking of earlier Abhidharma systems), a complete map of the path (outlining in some detail the progress of calm and insight meditation), and a complex understanding of the nature of buddhahood. As with all Buddhist thought, one should not be misled by the philosophical sophistication of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra thought. Their teachings are not seen as mere intellectual abstraction which to all practical intents and purposes we can forget about. The theoretical content of these systems are as ever orientated towards releasing beings from suffering. For Madhyamaka, as long as we see a world of things that exist in themselves, we are trying, however subtly, to hold on to things that ultimately must slip from our grasp, and this can only cause ourselves and others suffering. Likewise, for Yogācāra, as long as we see the world in terms of really existent experiencing subjects and really existing

experienced objects, we are trapped in a world of beings grasping at their experiences as objects of possession; once more this will only end in more suffering for all concerned. What both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra point towards is not simply a change of intellectual view, but a radical change of heart, deep within ourselves. While it is certainly the case that both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra are concerned with the highest understanding, the perfect wisdom that penetrates directly to the way things are, they also focus on the subtlest forms of greed—the subtlest tendencies of the mind to grasp, cling, and fix—as the root of all other forms of greed. In other words, the concern is with the greed and delusion as the principal causes of suffering, and a complete letting go as its cessation.

As I have already indicated, it is important to understand in what sense the Indian authors of the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra theoretical writings are 'Mahāyānists'. Essentially they are Mahāyānists in that they privilege the path of the Bodhisattva and recognize the authority of the Mahāyāna sūtras. But they do not reject the earlier tradition. These authors continued to operate within the existing ordination lineages of the Saṅgha, and when trying to justify their understanding of emptiness or the store consciousness they will as soon appeal to the generally accepted texts of the Nikāyas/Āgamas and Abhidharma as to the Mahāyāna sūtras. Much of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra theory represents a continuation of and development of particular lines of thought within the broad Abhidharma tradition. Abhidharma is not rejected or thrown out; rather a particular understanding of the ontology of a dharma is rejected. But, although dharmas may ultimately not exist in themselves, the broad Abhidharma framework remains as the theoretical basis for understanding the workings of consciousness, for analysing progress along the path, and for breaking down our basic attachment to self.

The Tathāgatagarbha

There is suffering, and the root defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion cause beings suffering in all its forms. The cessation of

these defilements brings about the cessation of all that suffering. This is a statement of the first three of the four noble truths—a statement in primarily negative terms. But we can state the matter in more positive terms: it is not only the cessation of greed, aversion, and delusion that bring about the cessation of suffering but the positive cultivation of wisdom, loving kindness, and generosity. And this is the fourth noble truth: it is the development of such qualities that constitutes the path that leads to the cessation of suffering.

Another way of talking about the process of the arising of suffering and its cessation is in terms of the formula of dependent arising; again the usual statement is couched in negative terms: the progressive cessation of the various links in the chain ends in the cessation of suffering, but we saw too that this could be stated positively in terms of the progressive arising of various qualities beginning with faith and ending in knowledge and freedom. For the ordinary unawakened person the root causes of suffering, the defilements (*kleśa/kileśa*) of greed, aversion, and delusion, do battle with the root causes of awakening, the good qualities of wisdom, loving kindness, and generosity: we are internally in conflict. But this does not mean that we should conceive of ourselves as merely a battleground for a conflict that may go either way. For, although this may be how things appear in the short term, it is, according to the teaching of the Buddha as presented in the Nikāyas/Āgamas, our better nature that reflects our true nature: the mind is naturally radiant but becomes defiled by adventitious defilements (see p. 175). At heart we are not Māras but buddhas, and this is true of the being that is Māra himself. This way of thinking is part of the common heritage of all Buddhism, but in Mahāyāna sūtras it finds expression and is developed in the notion of the *tathāgata-garbha*: the 'womb' or 'embryo' (the Sanskrit *garbha* connotes both) of the Tathāgata. Thus in the Mahāyāna *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, the Buddha observes:

[W]hen I regard all beings with my buddha eye, I see that hidden within the kleśas of greed, desire, anger and stupidity there is seated augustly

and unmovingly the tathāgata's wisdom, the tathāgata's vision, and the tathāgata's body . . . [A]ll beings, though they find themselves with all sorts of kleśas, have a tathāgatagarbha that is eternally unsullied, and that is replete with virtues no different from my own.⁴⁹

The basic treatise of the *tathāgatagarbha* tradition of thought is the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* (also known as the *Uttaratantra*) attributed to Maitreya/Asaṅga. The *tathāgatagarbha* is an element of Buddhahood (*buddha-dhātu*) at the heart of our being, our intrinsic 'buddha nature'. Although some Mahāyānist writings acknowledged the possibility of beings who are eternally cut off from the possibility of buddhahood, the prevailing tradition, particularly important in East Asian Buddhism and reaching its most developed statement in Dōgen's Zen, is that all beings are intrinsically Buddhas.

Talk of the *tathāgatagarbha* as our eternal and true nature in contrast to illusory and ultimately unreal defilements leads to a tendency to conceive of it as an ultimate absolutely existing thing. The Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, especially influential in East Asian Buddhist thought, goes so far as to speak of it as our true self (*ātman*). Its precise metaphysical and ontological status is, however, open to interpretation in the terms of different Mahāyāna philosophical schools; for the Mādhyamikas it must be empty of its own existence like everything else; for the Yogācārin, following the *Lañkāvatāra*, it can be identified with store consciousness, as the receptacle of the seeds of awakening. Yet the problem of the metaphysics of the *tathāgatagarbha* persisted and is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the *rang-stong/gzhan-stong* debate in Tibet (see Chapter 10).