

CHAPTER ONE

CULTIVATING BUDDHA NATURE

In Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, Buddha nature is regarded as the intrinsic nature of all sentient beings. Despite differences in appearance, predisposition, character, likes and dislikes, there is something that is uniquely the same and universal that joins and combines all sentient beings. This nature is naturally abiding, like the oil in a sesame seed. We cannot see the oil in a single sesame seed but, just as the seed is impregnated with oil, we are all impregnated with potential awakening. We are all potential Buddhas. If we are courageous enough to recognise and act upon this potential we are less likely to be caught in our temporal habitual patterns. The term Buddha nature really means the quality which functions as the vehicle that allows us to become liberated. It must be apparent and manifest.

The universality of Buddha nature is the basic premise of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, which is a path of inclusivity. By contrast, for perhaps the first six or seven hundred years of Buddhist philosophy and teachings the path was very monastically orientated. Theravada was a path for the renunciate, that is, for those who could step out of family life and follow the path of mendicants. The first followers and noted disciples of the Buddha were almost all monks and nuns, although there were a few notable lay practitioners. Usually though, because ordination was not possible for the majority of people, there seemed to be little opportunity to achieve enlightenment. India was full of such religions at that time and the mendicant persuasion was not restricted to Buddhism.

Early in the third century CE, the great Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, who was prophesied by the Buddha himself, promulgated the Mahayana teachings. The Mahayana, or so-called 'greater vehicle' teachings highlighted the existence of Buddha nature in all beings. This meant that lay people, who had previously been effectively excluded from the teachings, could now move on the path towards enlightenment. The primary emphasis of Mahayana was on altruism rather than renunciation. This is not to say that the whole Buddhist school was based on doctrinal issues. Both ideas are accepted in the Mahayana and Theravadin traditions; it is only the emphasis that is different. In the Theravadin tradition, renunciation is seen as an excellent opportunity for the practitioner, if he or she is capable of renouncing family and worldly life. But within that tradition many people have been denied the opportunity to travel on the path to enlightenment because it has not provided an alternative way of practicing without renunciation. This limitation became an important inspiration for scholars like Nagarjuna, who highlighted the importance of developing the path of inclusivity and aimed to encourage lay practitioners to seek the path of enlightenment through the idea of the intrinsic Buddha nature.

Two Kinds of Buddha Nature

There are two kinds of Buddha nature. The first is 'naturally abiding Buddha nature' which is intrinsic to all sentient beings, like the potential oil in each sesame seed. It is uniquely the same and universal, joining all sentient beings.

The second kind of Buddha nature is 'deliberately cultivated Buddha nature'. We have to be born in particular circumstances, in a particular form of life, and with various fortunate conditions to be able to cultivate our Buddha nature. Even insects and other animals have naturally abiding Buddha nature, but they cannot cultivate their Buddha nature whilst in that form of life. They must end that

life and be born in a suitable form of rebirth, that is, a precious human rebirth, in order to develop a cultivated Buddha nature. Buddha nature is cultivated by a person undertaking virtuous deeds in many lives which culminate in a form of life that matures their karma and allows them to find the holy Dharma. Not all human beings can be regarded as having a precious human rebirth. Only if a person shows natural karmic affinity, and inclination and devotion to the teachings can they be regarded as having a rebirth which allows them to cultivate Buddha nature. Such people show attraction to the teachings without obstructions. They are born karmically with a form of life that is ready to be cultivated but they still have to be introduced to the teachings on altruism.

Cultivated Buddha nature is the positive outlook in a person who sees that the sesame seed is wonderful, that it has oil in it. Such a person cherishes even one sesame seed. They see the quality of the oil rather than the quantity. They see that even one seed is just as important as all the other seeds and that each seed in turn contributes to the oil. A person may think, 'I'm nobody, I feel ashamed, I am not a good example of a Buddhist or a person who has altruism'. Such a person is seeing themselves as merely one sesame seed. But even one seed has some oil. People who have cultivated Buddha nature on top of naturally abiding Buddha nature can see that however trivial is the virtue within themselves they can still cherish that quality. We are so big, with big mouths and big bodies, and our consumption is so high that one seed seems very little to us. But to an ant, one seed is enough for a good meal. An ant does not have the idea that it needs so many sesame seeds. Similarly, only a person who has cultivated Buddha nature will be perceptive enough to dare to press one seed for its oil. Such a person will appreciate how wonderful it is that a bottle of oil comes from the accumulation of the oil of each and every seed combined; that the oil is from all of us, each discretely saying 'it is not me'. We can only produce the oil if we stop being ourselves. Just as a Bodhisattva is a person who uses his or her altruistic mind or heart for the benefit of others, it is the conjoining of our self and others which will produce the quantity of oil needed to satisfy the needs of sentient beings. Oil is usually regarded as a fuel and in this analogy the oil is our Buddha nature which is a provision for enlightenment. How we use or cultivate this provision determines whether we are able to acknowledge the oil in a single sesame seed.

How do we give rise to our cultivated Buddha nature? Firstly, the appropriate conditions must be present. In giving rise to our Buddha nature it is not the quantity of our feeling but how genuinely we feel for the welfare of other sentient beings, without necessarily saying so. It is important to train our own thoughts first before declaring that we care about all sentient beings and want to rescue them from suffering. If we are confident in our prayers and motivation we will, as a sign of our developing altruism, keep a close eye on our own development without outwardly stating that we promote altruism. We should not necessarily say, 'I'm Mahayanist, look at me, look at my logo, I wear these badges'. We do not need to express these things and we should rather train discreetly in developing a big heart. It is said that there may be one Bodhisattva in every ten people but most Bodhisattvas are very discreet, shy, and quiet. They do not usually hold important positions and they do not talk about what they do because they know that expressing their altruism might spoil it. This is probably why the early practitioners did not promote altruism as a teaching. They did teach that unless we help ourselves we cannot help others. Consequently, the idea of individual liberation developed which emphasised the need for some level of understanding of individuality and personal conduct before people can be considered worthy to help others. We can only be certain of our ability to help others if we have something good to offer and we are confident that we are able to help. Simply belonging to a group or tradition that promotes the teaching of altruism does not necessarily mean that we are capable of helping others.

Apparent Signs of a Cultivable Buddha Nature

There are many ways to measure the signs that a person has a cultivatable Buddha nature. Compassion, inclination, patience and virtue so as not to do harm to others are the four apparent signs of a cultivatable Buddha nature. All of us have some of these characteristics now and then; even people who have not been introduced to the teachings on compassion may nevertheless have compassion. Being compassionate does not mean being kind only occasionally or when it is convenient. It is, however, a good sign if a person is known as a compassionate person.

Compassion is the first sign of a cultivatable Buddha nature. If a person has a compassionate nature and believes that other people's feelings and sorrows are as important as their own, then they will go out of their way to do things for the benefit of other people. Many kinds of beings have such compassion. For example, it can be seen in nature where parents show loving kindness to their offspring.

The second sign of a cultivatable Buddha nature is inclination. Inclination is the genuine determination to improve our ability to assist other beings. It is the inclination towards altruism and towards the teachings of the Triple Gem (the precious gem of the Buddha, the Dharma or holy teachings, and the Sangha or holy community which upholds the teachings). We demonstrate an inclination towards altruism if we genuinely seek the benefit of others without any selfish concerns. However, although we may have an inclination towards altruism we do not necessarily have fully developed altruism. Inclination towards the teachings of the Triple Gem is demonstrated by showing a great affinity with a Buddhist community and a desire to learn, to study, and to practice.

The third sign of a person with a cultivatable Buddha nature is patience. Some people have very thin patience even though they have a lot of other good qualities. Conversely, some people may not have many good qualities but they are very patient. Strong patience and tolerance is a good sign of the existence of a cultivatable Buddha nature. 'Patience' in this context refers to patience towards others who hurt and abuse us and cause harm to our life and welfare. It also refers to using this patience as a device to progress our spiritual life. It does not refer to patience in winning or gaining victory which is impure patience and is very common. Patience is one of the six perfections we should cultivate.

The fourth sign of a cultivatable Buddha nature is always trying to do what is virtuous so as not to be harmful to others or to ourselves. In this context, we should be cautious about wanting to be 'helpful' because being 'helpful' can ultimately be counterproductive. We should instead concentrate upon being harmless. A lot of people and organisations say that they help people, which sounds interesting and attractive, but very few say that their mission is to avoid harm. Our intention to help people should be closely examined because we need to be sure that our enthusiasm to help is not causing any harm. For example, most 'love/ hate' relationships, in which many people are hurt and injured, start off with one person wanting to give things and be loving towards the other but in the end, they may end up not helping anyone at all. Sometimes their enthusiasm to help others has caused more harm than help.

There are very few teachings which say to stop harming people. Teachings usually say to help people but we should not do things if our assistance is not wanted or is seen as an intrusion. We should not label ourselves as a 'rescuer'. How do we know that a person even wants our help or that we have the qualities required to be able to help them? We must consider the appropriateness of our help to the target at which it is aimed. Remember that the target is another person; is what we consider help or assistance actually good for them or are we really trying to make ourselves feel good? Our neediness to help others should be treated with caution.