

Self And No Self

PREFACE

Buddhist monastics should stop burying their heads in the sand like ostriches

Upon becoming a Buddhist monastic, one should contemplate what made him renounce the mundane world in the first place. If it is to transcend cyclic transmigration, he should search for the true meaning of the Path to Liberation. However, if seeking the Path to Buddhahood is his goal, then he must search for the true meaning of Buddhahood. A practitioner should not be bound by the fame of a renowned master or by a sentimental attachment to the master—disciple relationship. He should separate his personal sentiments from his learning of Buddhism, leaving his personal sentiments aside while exploring the true meaning of the Path to Liberation and the Path to Buddhahood, so that his Dharma cultivation would not be diverted from its original purpose even as he maintains a good relationship with his teacher. For these reasons, all Buddhist monastics should stop burying their heads in the sand like ostriches; instead, they should directly face their chosen path and honestly ask themselves if their practice method is consistent with the Path to Liberation and the Path to Buddhahood. If someone raises questions about their practice method and goes on a doctrinal debate with them, citing concrete evidence, they should objectively look into the matter being questioned and not hold on to their personal sentiments toward their teacher. Only by doing this can they avoid setbacks in their Dharma cultivation and be deemed wise persons.

If a monastic cannot eliminate his attachment to his renowned teacher, whom he is close to, and single mindedly defends his teacher, continuing the wrong cultivation

taught by his teacher, this will not only obstruct his own Dharma cultivation but will also allow his teacher to go further astray, which a monastic should not do. Thus, all Buddhist monastics should objectively, calmly, and rationally explore the Dharma and not ignore inquiries regarding it due to personal sentiments. Ignoring inquiries will cause both the monastic and his teacher to lose the great benefits of being monastics cultivating the Path to Liberation.

The Buddha Dharma of the Three Vehicles speaks of the notion of No Self.¹ Nonetheless, so many famous Buddhist masters, both monastics and lay practitioners, often fail to grasp the real meaning of No Self. They simply claim that the principle of No Self is just "dependent arising without an intrinsic nature" and that "all phenomena are empty." If someone points out that there exists a non-empty *Tathāgatagarbha*,² they attack this person and falsely claim that he believes in the concept of "divinity self" or the concept of Brahma Atma Aikyam and is therefore a non-Buddhist, that his doctrinal teachings are not the Buddha Dharma, and that the Dharmas expounded by this person, which are actually profound and wondrous correct teachings, do not conform to the teachings of original Buddhism. The fact is, the four *Āgama* Sutras (the *Āgamas*), which date back to original Buddhism, do teach the Dharma of "No Self" yet also teach the "Self" ubiquitously. This "Self" is referred to as the original state of nirvana, the ultimate reality of all phenomena, the suchness, the "consciousness" (*vijñāna*) referred to in "consciousness conditions name-and-form," the adored *ālaya*, the enjoyed *ālaya*, the delighted *ālaya*, the rejoiced *ālaya*, or the causal consciousness. It is sometimes even directly referred to as the "Sew" in the four *Āgamas*.

¹ Since this book is about the correct and incorrect meanings and interpretations of self and no self, we adopt the convention of using the capitalized Self and No Self to denote the correct interpretations of the terms and the lower-case self and no self to denote their incorrect interpretations.

² *Tathāgatagarbha* denotes the eighth consciousness, *ālaya-vijñāna*, and is thus used interchangeably with the latter throughout the book.

In the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtras* (the Sūtras), the "Self" is referred to as "the non-mind mind," "the mind without the characteristics of a mind," "the non-mindful mind, the non-abiding mind," or "the unmindful mind of bodhisattvas." The Sūtras also state that this mind is the mind of true reality and has never given rise to any slightest thought or been mindful of any dharma, never abided in any phenomena or displayed any characteristics of a mind, such as seeing, hearing, perceiving, or knowing, since the beginningless eons. Hence, this mind is said to be a "non-mind" mind. The Sūtras also broadly elucidate the Middle Way nature of this mind, also known as the eight negations of Mādhyamika (*astānta*). Furthermore, the Sūtras state that this mind is a mind without attachment amid all phenomena within the six paths of transmigration of the three realms, and that it is the reality of nirvana. In fact, if this mind does not manifest rebirth within the stream of six paths of transmigration of the three realms, there will be no dharma at all. Therefore, the Sūtras say that there are no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mental faculty; no form, sound, odor, taste, touch, or mental object; no eye consciousness and all the way to no mental consciousness element. When these eighteen elements (*dhātu*) are totally extinguished, there will be no dharma left, and only this consciousness will exist. This principle applies to both mundane and supramundane phenomena; that is, all kinds of existence arise from this mind of true reality. Hence, it is posited that when this consciousness abides in the nirvanic state, there is no ignorance or ending of ignorance. The Sūtras even stated: "If there were any phenomenon beyond nirvana, it would also be like a dream or an illusion." This is because all phenomena are brought forth and manifested by this nirvanic consciousness.

All the foregoing descriptions elucidate the essential nature of the eighth consciousness, the mind of true reality. For this reason, the notion of *prajñā* conveyed in the Sūtras is not the "emptiness of all phenomena" or "empty-nature mere-name system" asserted by Candrakīrti, Tsongkhapa, Yin Shùn, Dalai Lama, and others.

Rather, these sutras rely on all phenomena within the six paths of transmigration of the three realms to describe the Middle Way nature and the nirvanic nature of this true mind, enabling all Buddhist disciples to know that all mundane and supramundane dharmas are brought forth and manifested by such a true mind. Having established such correct knowledge and view, one can then know how to cultivate progressively and possibly realize the Mahayana bodhi. Thus, although the Mahayana Dharma teaches No Self, it is not a nihilistic view of the emptiness of all phenomena; instead, it reveals the ultimate reality of the remainderless nirvana—the true mind. This true mind is called the Self of the non-self, the mind of the non-mind, and the true reality of all phenomena. Upon realizing this mind, one will comprehend the true reality and immediately bring forth the Mahayana wisdom pertaining to *prajñā*; thus, one will be referred to as a sage or saint of Mahayana "distinctive teaching. "

Given that this true mind possesses the essential nature of permanence and can never be extinguished, unlike the aggregates (*skandhas*), sense fields (*āyatana*), and elements (*dhātu*) that arise, abide, change, and cease, which are impermanent and bound to perish, this true mind is nominally termed "Self," unlike the impermanent aggregates, sense fields, and elements that have No Self. As a matter of fact, this true mind that brings forth the aggregates, sense fields, and elements of sentient beings' selves itself possesses the nature of No Self. A Two Vehicle adept who has not turned to the Great Vehicle and has yet to realize this true mind also cannot comprehend it. In view of this, the No Self Dharma of *prajñā* is indeed so extremely profound and cannot be understood by unenlightened or wrongly enlightened masters. They often misunderstand this and thus cannot grasp the true principles of Self and No Self.

Elucidating the "knowledge-of-all-aspects" pertaining to the *prajñā* of the ultimate truth, the Consciousness-Only sutras expounded during the third round of Dharma transmission state the essential nature of the *ālaya*-consciousness—the true mind can

give rise to and manifest all phenomena within the transmigration of the three realms.

The following teaching is expounded to all Buddhists:

The term "remainderless nirvana" is established based on the elimination of afflictive hindrances in the eighth consciousness—the *Tathāgatagarbha*. "*Prajñā* " refers to the realization of the *Tathāgatagarbha* and the ability to personally take in the *Tathāgatagarbha*'s properties, which allow one to bring forth mundane and supra mundane wisdom of the foremost meaning.

In light of the foregoing, the Consciousness-Only sutras from the third round of the Dharma transmissions state that the four kinds of nirvana and the four kinds of wisdom on the Buddha Ground are entirely based on the eighth consciousness. The sutras further elucidate the true principles of knowledge-of-all-aspects: all the seeds stored in the eighth consciousness that every sentient being inherently possesses, including all the tainted mundane dharma seeds, all the taintless supramundane dharma seeds, the outflow of all seeds, and so forth. Based on these, the sutras elaborate on the flow of the seeds within the foundational consciousness and what it manifests and presents: both the physical body and the seven evolving consciousnesses, both the mental concomitants and the wholesome or afflictive dharmas that the seven evolving consciousnesses correspond with, the material factors included in the sense field of the mental object, the formations not associated with the mind, the six kinds of uncompounded factors, and so on. To explain their dharma natures in detail, the sutras further explicate the second able-changing consciousness—Manas, and the third able-changing consciousnesses—the six consciousnesses, including the conscious mind up to the eye consciousness. Thereby, the dharmas of the four conditions, five effects, and so on are set forth accordingly and result in the higher wisdom training of the Hundred Dharmas: knowledge-of-all-aspects. This kind of training in higher wisdom about

prajñā is unique and not shared by adepts of the Two Vehicles, ordinary mortals, or any non-Buddhist. In fact, it is incomprehensible to the unenlightened; only those who have personally realized the eighth consciousness, *Tathāgatagarbha*, thereby deepening their understanding through gradual verification, can comprehend and be called sages or saints of Mahayana distinctive teaching. Thus, although the true principle of the knowledge-of-all-aspects speaks of No Self in the aggregates, sense fields, and elements, it in fact directly conveys the true reality of the dharma realm: the eighth consciousness, *Tathāgatagarbha*, which is the origin of all dharma realms.

The eighth consciousness, *Tathāgatagarbha*, is devoid of the functions of seeing, hearing, perceiving, and knowing; it is tranquil and nirvanic, never ponders or makes decisions, and is therefore named No Self. Such properties are well known and personally experienced by all enlightened Buddhists, thereby leading them to obtain the wisdom pertaining to *prajñā*. On the other hand, despite the No Self nature of the *Tathāgatagarbha*, it is designated as the "Self" for expediency purposes, given that it has existed permanently since the beginningless eons and will exist until the endless future, without any discontinuity. Moreover, it is based on the eighth consciousness, which exists eternally and continuously, without ceasing, while containing all the mundane and supramundane dharma seeds, tainted or untainted, therefore allowing enlightened Buddhist learners, based on their bodhi wisdom attained through awakening, to gradually purify all the manifestations and habitual seeds of afflictive hindrances contained in this consciousness, and to gradually eradicate the "beginningless ignorance"—the "cognitive hindrance," which has inherently existed since the beginningless eons. As a result, the contents of this eighth consciousness are perfectly pure. Both its *ālaya* nature and maturational (*vipāka*) nature have been entirely extinguished. The eighth consciousness is then renamed "reality-suchness," the state of ultimate Buddhahood. It is based on the noumenon and functions of the eighth *ālaya*-consciousness and its permanent existence in the dharma realm, without any

discontinuation or destruction, that the Buddha often refers to it as the "Self" in the Three-Vehicle Sutras for expedient teaching purposes, despite its No Self nature. It is only with such true principle consisting of both Self and No Self nature that it can be deemed the "ultimate" and "definitive Buddha Dharma." It is hoped that every monastic Dharma master will first understand this principle to avoid misleading himself and others while trying to expound the Dharma. By doing so, both the master and his disciples will be on the right path toward awakening and post-awakening cultivation.

All the Three-Vehicle Sutras—the *Āgama* Sutras, *prajñā paramita*, and Consciousness-Only—have implicitly and explicitly expounded the true principle of "No Self and Self." Thus, all Buddhist monastics should face this true principle instead of evading it. Monastics should be able to distinguish the right principle from the erroneous view, which claims that "all phenomena are dependently originated without a fundamental cause," so as not to mislead themselves and others. Before a virtuous mentor discloses this true principle to the public by refuting the incorrect doctrines and contrasting them with the true Dharma, it would not be a major fault to teach it and thus misguide others because this is not done intentionally. However, such true principle has now been proclaimed by a true mentor, but monastics are reluctant to seek to unravel the truth and make the correct choice, evading their responsibility of leading sentient beings toward the right path. They knowingly and deliberately expound the erroneous dharma and misguide themselves and others, which is a grievous transgression. In light of this, I call upon all Buddhist monastics to quash the ostrich mentality and embrace the true principle of the "real Self," which possesses a No Self nature, and to guide all Buddhist learners back to the Buddha's real intent. This will allow monastics and practitioners to fully cultivate and attain the true principle of "Self and No Self" and help it spread widely and last for as long as possible. If this is achieved, there will be blessings for both humans and celestial beings, and great joy over the assurance that the True Dharma will continue on earth. Moreover, it is the monastics'

indispensable obligation to disseminate the Buddha Dharma as they are the paragons of Buddhist communities and should be the mainstream Dharma preachers. In light of this, from now on, all monastic masters should not follow any guru of the Prasaṅgika Mādhyamika school, which mistakenly negates the eighth consciousness, or embrace the erroneous view that "all phenomena are dependently originated without a fundamental cause" taught by Candrakīrti, Tsongkhapa, Dalai Lama, Yin Shùn, and others. Instead, they should all return quickly to the Buddha's teachings in the various sutras of the Three Vehicles: the true principle that the reality-suchness is the premise of the teaching that "all phenomena are dependent arising without an intrinsic nature." My hope is that monastics will not fall prey to the ostrich attitude or avoid carrying out their major duty of preaching the Buddha Dharma. Meanwhile, monastics ought to realize the Path, thereby disseminating the True Dharma and upholding their important role as Buddhist Dharma masters.

It is for the aforementioned reasons that I delivered a speech on the true principle of "Self and No Self" to the audience of our True Enlightenment Practitioners Association during this Chinese New Year gathering, and such speech has been transcribed for publication. I thus wrote this preface to call upon all Buddhist monastics to refrain from burying their heads in the sand, as ostriches do, and boldly face the ultimate and definitive true principle of "Self and No Self."

Respectfully,

Xiǎo Píngshí

Son of the Buddha

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