

Third Truth – Beyond the Attainment of Non-attainment



Buddha then asked, "What do you think, Subhuti, did Buddha attain anything by obtaining the perfect incomparable enlightenment?"

"No, lord" Subhuti replied, "the way I understand, he did not attain anything by obtaining the perfect incomparable enlightenment."

"This is so" Buddha said "and that's why we call it the perfect incomparable enlightenment. If a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha were to say to himself, 'I am enlightened' he would be admitting there is an individual person, a separate self and personality, and would therefore not be a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha."

The Dilemma of Non-Attainment

The problem with non-duality is that, because our higher individual existence is not properly acknowledged, it is very difficult to conceive of and explain the presence of ignorance and the attainment of enlightenment. If there is no individuality, who is ignorant? If our me is unreal, who reaches liberation? Even when the ego, or personal self, is acknowledged in Buddhism (as the lower truth), the question remains: can the relative obtain the absolute? Or, is it true that only when the relative is

Third Truth – Beyond the Attainment of Non-Attainment

dissolved can the absolute be unveiled? In this case, there is no one left who can claim to have attained anything – hence the paradox of ‘attaining non-attainment.’

But this does not explain how that which is unreal can contribute to the unveiling of the real. Because the philosophy of non-duality in both Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta has tended to attract intellectually oriented people, both traditions have, over the centuries, devised an array of philosophical solutions to these quasi-paradoxes. If the mind tries hard enough, it can always produce a solution, even if it involves a degree of denial. But are these solutions real or are they just clever mental constructs?

One of the main solutions presented in Buddhism are the concepts of acquired and original enlightenment, which we have discussed at length in previous articles. These concepts express the paradox that we need to realize what should be ours by right – our original nature. The idea of ‘non-attainment’ is one of the essential subjects in the exquisite Diamond Sutra. The Diamond Sutra was Zen Master Hui Neng’s most beloved sutra, and as such, has been widely repeated and retaught through many Zen koans and stories. For instance:

A monk asked Seijo, "Daitso Chisho Buddha did zazen for ten kalpas in a Meditation Hall, but could not realize the highest truth, and so could not become fully emancipated. Why was this?"

Seijo said, "Your question is a very appropriate [self-explanatory] one!"

The monk asked again, "Why did he not attain Buddhahood by doing zazen in the Meditation Hall?"

Seijo replied, "Because he did not."



The questions posed here are: Did Buddha ‘not attain’ Buddhahood because he did not need to attain it, or because there is nothing to attain, or because he attained non-attainment, or finally, because he had gone beyond attainment and non-attainment? ¹

Is Ignorance an Illusion?

It is difficult to speak about enlightenment unless we first acknowledge ignorance is real; one simply cannot exist without the other. But is the relationship between ignorance and enlightenment so simple as to equate enlightenment with removal of ignorance? In both Buddhism and Advaita there have been teachers who deny enlightenment is something to be ‘attained,’ claiming that, by wanting to attain our pure nature, we presuppose our separation from it. Hence, in Zen there is a saying, ‘kill the Buddha,’ which means to eliminate the duality between the seeker and his goal. But statements like this should be read metaphorically, rather than as actual descriptions of reality. In order to realize our true self, there comes a point where we must indeed stop seeking in order to fall back into our pure subjectivity. But if we stop seeking prematurely, before we have established access to I am, non-seeking is no different than ignorance. We will still be hovering like ghosts in the shadows of the dimension of forgetfulness.

Over the ages, Buddhist thinkers have devised many complex philosophies to try to embrace the existence of ignorance within the context of an absolute truth:

1. There is no ignorance, it only appears to be so
2. Ignorance exists, but it is unreal (it dissolves upon seeing it for what it is)

¹ Zen master Dogen wrote a long explanation of this koan in ‘Shobogenzo.’ Apparently he was thrilled with the complicated philosophy, paradox and intellectual sophistication inherent in it. However, for an ordinary seeker needing simple answers, the debates surrounding this koan are no more than useless intellectualism, a game of the mind out of touch with reality through becoming trapped in its own deceptive logic.



3. Ignorance is both real and unreal (it is real on the lower level and unreal on the higher level)
4. The fourfold negation: ignorance is real, is not real, is neither real nor unreal, is both real and unreal (by his fourfold negation, Nagarjuna proved the absurdity of trying to prove anything, through going beyond the assertion that there is such a thing as ignorance or its absence)
5. Samsara is nirvana (there is no dichotomy between ignorance and enlightenment – ignorance is another manifestation of the Buddha nature, which itself is beyond the polarity of bondage and liberation)

The most convincing resolution comes through the concept of the ‘two truths’ - the lower truth and the higher truth. The lower truth is our relative nature, and the higher truth our absolute nature. This twofold truth avoids a complete denial of our lower nature, which in many Buddhist schools is seen as heretical. Hence, in Buddhism, they say “ignorance has no beginning, but it does have an end.” We cannot find the beginning of ignorance, because this would suggest that, at some mysterious point in time, or timelessness, the pure nature of existence became contaminated, which would be a contradiction in terms. Instead, Buddhism accepts the presence of ignorance, and reconciles itself with it by calling it a ‘lower truth.’ Through the concept of this lower truth, the apparent existence of ego and suffering, together with the need for a spiritual path and practice, are also explained.

The Diamond Sutra itself tries to point us directly to the higher truth. It says there is neither ignorance nor enlightenment. It also suggests there is no such thing as a ‘teaching’ of Buddha. For instance, it says if a Bodhisattva wanted to save all the sentient beings (the Buddhist vow) this would be proof of his ignorance, because from the perspective of the higher truth, there are no sentient beings to save. This does not entirely deny the presence of the lower truth. Buddha obviously did not deny the journey he had been required to take to reach enlightenment. He saw that path as the lower truth upon which he chose not to abide; so while he accepted the lower truth, he sought constantly to transcend it. Buddha did declare, ‘I am enlightened,’ when he realized himself. However, internally, he was free from the self-image of being enlightened, because he went beyond the lower truth in a similar way a cured person goes beyond his sickness and forgets about it.



From the standpoint of Zen Buddhism, to make the higher truth absolute would represent an attachment to emptiness and a clinging to a one-sided view. To interpret the Diamond Sutra through a complete exclusion of the lower truth would be to indicate one has fallen into the 'trap' of the absolute standpoint. This is the position taken by those who deny the need for a spiritual path, or claim 'we are all awakened' or 'there is only consciousness.' Such statements display a lack of the imagination needed to embrace the complex nature of reality – the co-existence and complete interconnection of the lower and higher truths.

Non-Duality – the First Step in the Wrong Direction

We can easily get entangled in the intricacies of the relationship between the lower and higher truths, the relative and the absolute, duality and non-duality, separation and oneness. However, before we attempt to solve a problem, we must make sure we really have one. The initial assumptions behind the concept of non-duality need to be questioned. There is nothing more ignorant than looking for solutions to problems which do not really exist.

Our first step often determines our whole journey. If we begin to walk in the wrong direction, how can we expect to arrive at the correct place? Even if we are determined and filled with purpose, we are bound to fail. The original concept of non-duality was the first step in the wrong direction. One can go deeply into the subtleties of the Diamond Sutra, unraveling its hidden messages, but the fact is, the person who wrote it was conditioned by an inaccurate view of reality. If its foundations are crooked, sooner or later a building will collapse. The logic of non-duality has produced a great variety of artificial constructs to keep it from falling down, but was it really worth defending?

Evidently, people are stubborn; they abide upon their habitual concepts. Those who have walked the Buddhist path for many lifetimes have become fully identified with the Buddhist perception of reality. When they open their eyes in the morning, they see a Buddhist universe, created through the concepts of emptiness, impermanence and non-self. This is not to say that none of it is true, but rather that to question our basic assumptions is the very essence of our evolution into higher understanding.



Third Truth – Beyond the Attainment of Non-Attainment

There have been numerous teachers and masters who, despite their great depth, could not free themselves from the basic conditioning inherited from their traditions. In some cases, this was due to a lack of ingenuity, in others, to an addiction to the simple comfort of following something they knew and were familiar with, and in still others, a fear of entering uncharted territory. Chogyam Trungpa is a good example. He was an extremely intelligent and influential Tibetan teacher, who was very unique in his style. He refused to follow some of the traditional customs; he dressed in western clothes and learned to speak perfect English. However, despite his intelligence, he could not go beyond Buddhist idiosyncrasies or question the fundamentals of the Buddhist concept of reality.

In his excellent book, *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*, Trungpa speaks of how the ego is created through the process of the five skandhas: from form, to feeling, to impulse-perception, to concept, to consciousness. He says the skandhas have been formed due to ignorance, born out of a fear of emptiness, in order to shield our ego from the truth of its own insubstantiality. But is this so? Let's start by assuming the whole concept of the five skandhas is no more than a very simplistic and unrefined attempt to grasp the rich complexity of human consciousness. This concept was originally conceived to prove, alongside the concept of dependent origination, there is no self (anatta) inherent to our consciousness. But if Trungpa really believed this to be true, why didn't he simply eliminate his own skandhas, and thereby demonstrate his ego was not afraid of being insubstantial? Why do we talk about things that we cannot live?

In spite of his intellectual depth and access to a deeper consciousness, Trungpa was not in touch with the most fundamental element of his consciousness: his very me. How could he be, if he was indoctrinated throughout his life with the idea there is no such thing? In spite of being so bright and inquisitive, he was unable to free himself from these constraints. He did not have the courage, capacity or imagination to question them.

The concept of five skandhas does not describe with any depth or precision how our consciousness actually operates; it miserably fails to reflect who we really are. *Who* is behind form, feeling, perception, mental formations and discernment? Whom do all these elements serve? Is it their sole purpose to create the illusion of self, and if so, to whom does that illusion refer? As previously noted, the concept of the



five skandhas can only reflect how the mind of an ignorant person functions in a limited way: it does not reflect the reality of someone who is conscious. This is because one who is conscious knows himself to be the true subject to form, feeling, perception, mind and discernment; the essence of his me is the very axle of dependent origination. What Chogyam Trungpa involuntarily revealed was not the ego's fear of insubstantiality, but rather, the Buddhist's fear of having a real and substantial identity, a fear of taking responsibility for one's positive, constructive existence and active participation in creation. Hiding behind the concepts of non-self and emptiness is not the solution to our human dilemma.

The Third Truth

The concepts of lower and higher truths can be a nice way to justify a condition in which one lives the comfort of normal life with a normal ego, while preaching there is no self. When Nagarjuna formulated his solution, all the Buddhist intellectuals were happy the apparently unsolvable non-dual absurdities had been solved. But had they been solved? Not at all - they had just been rationalized. What is lacking in the concept of the 'two truths' is the third truth. The first truth is the truth of duality: that of separation, ego, personality, and ignorance. The second truth is the truth of non-duality: the absolute nature of existence, non-discrimination, and non-conceptualization; the not coming, not going, not staying principle of the ultimate. But, while these two truths seem neat and agreeable in themselves, there is no real meeting between them; there is no bridge. They still cannot explain how that which is dual and false can attain reality, that which does not need to be attained because it is already perfect.

Another truth is needed, beyond the two truths, in order to make sense of everything. The third truth is the truth of higher or enlightened duality. Unless the third truth is realized, non-duality is not just flawed – it is ignorant. The first truth is ignorance and the second truth is ignorance as well. Even worse, the second one is the kind of ignorance that calls itself knowledge. It is no more than confusion hiding as the pretense of understanding.

How can we even conceive of attaining self-realization if there is no link between our hated and negated separate self and absolute reality? Only when the third truth is illuminated does it all become clear, and effortlessly falls into the right place. There is no need to rationalize anything, or to invent transcendental logic, in order to explain things that cannot be - and do not need to be - explained. The fundamental



Third Truth – Beyond the Attainment of Non-Attainment

flaw of non-duality is the assumption that, by eliminating our sense of me, the pure nature of existence is revealed. How shocking and thoughtless it has been that great minds have chosen to identify with this false perception of reality for several thousands of years. The real and higher truth is much simpler: we can realize the nature of reality because we have a sense of me. Without that me, nothing exists for us and nothing does not exist.

The third truth reveals the principle of higher duality, in which the nature of reality is realized by infusing the essence of our individuality into it. Not only is our me transcending ignorance by merging with the absolute existence, it is also actualizing its own pure subjectivity. Enlightenment is the meeting of two dimensions of subjectivity: the individual and the universal. In lower duality (the first truth) there is neither individuality nor real subjectivity; there is only an ignorant and fragmented sense of me. In this scenario, the philosophy of non-duality actually is correct: such a me is the very root of our pain and separation. But to discard it at this point is to throw the baby out with the bath water, and to commit an atrocity against the sacred seed from which we become our higher selves. The spiritual path is the alchemical process of metamorphosis, from the lower duality into the higher duality, between the shores of which the nature of non-duality is embraced.

Unless we accept the truth of the duality between me and I am, the individual and universal, there is no way we can even come close to understanding the relationship between acquired and original enlightenment. Unless we know who is reaching enlightenment, how can we grasp what enlightenment really is? To know 'who' it is, we must awaken the individual dimension of self-realization. It is easy to say enlightenment is freedom from the illusion of being 'someone.' It all sounds very clever, but is not intelligent, and it represents a gross insensitivity to our very nature. The revelation of the third truth opens a way out of the limitations of non-duality, but without discarding its essence. The higher duality of the third truth embraces both lower duality and non-duality in the apperception of our complete self and the transcendence of the realm of illusion.

The Diamond Sutra is a metaphor, and only shows us one angle of looking at truth. The abjuration of the fact that Buddha 'attained' enlightenment should not be taken literally. To believe Buddha's



Third Truth – Beyond the Attainment of Non-Attainment

desperate search for liberation in those crucial and torturous years of practice and self-mortification was a ‘wrong way of looking at things’ is insulting to a great man.

Why did Buddhism found itself on these misdirected assumptions? We must bear in mind Buddhism was a kind of ‘Hinduism beyond traditions.’ But no matter how innovative and independent he was, Buddha was still a child of India, and therefore instinctively saw enlightenment as equal to dissolution. Due to the deeply ingrained perception of his spiritual purpose, he failed to identify correctly ‘who’ had reached spiritual illumination. His soul got caught in non-dual logic like a bird in an invisible net of preconceived ideas. He reached freedom, and yet did not fully understand who had reached that freedom. While this did not constitute a problem for him personally, it created a huge level of confusion for future generations, which continues right up to the present day.

It is so important to rectify Buddha’s mistakes and omissions, and put things in the right perspective. Enlightenment is thorny territory. The line between true wisdom and insanity, between freedom and yet another kind of enslavement, between awakening and falling into further illusion and falsehood, is often very blurred. Caution must be exercised right up to the very end, for it is usually at the end where we fall into another devious pitfall. It is said that most climbing accidents happen just before reaching the summit, and spirituality is no different. The third truth, the truth of the soul and of our higher individuality, is our saving grace in the final test within the hazardous spaces of enlightenment. It will hold us safely and lovingly between the skies of transcendence and the dark pits of self-denial.

Blessings,

Anadi

For a full glossary of terminology please visit our website www.anaditeaching.com/glossary

