



## The Development of Ego

As we are going to examine the Buddhist path from beginning to end, from the beginner's mind to the enlightened one, I think it would be best to start with something very concrete and realistic, the field we are going to cultivate. It would be foolish to study more advanced subjects before we are familiar with the starting point, the nature of ego. We have a saying in Tibet that, before the head has been cooked properly, grabbing the tongue is of no use. Any spiritual practice needs this basic understanding of the starting point, the material with which we are working.

If we do not know the material with which we are working, then our study is useless; speculations about the goal become mere fantasy. These speculations may take the form of advanced ideas and descriptions of spiritual experiences, but they only exploit the weaker aspects of human nature, our expectations and desires to see and hear something colorful, something extraordinary. If we begin our study with these dreams of extraordinary, "enlightening" and dramatic experiences, then we will build up our expectations and preconceptions so that later, when we are actually working on the path, our minds will be occupied largely with what *will be* rather than with what *is*. It is destructive and not fair to people

to play on their weaknesses, their expectations and dreams, rather than to present the realistic starting point of what they are.

It is necessary, therefore, to start on what we are and why we are searching. Generally, all religious traditions deal with this material, speaking variously of *alaya-vijnana* or original sin or the fall of man or the basis of ego. Most religions refer to this material in a somewhat pejorative way, but I do not think it is such a shocking or terrible thing. We do not have to be ashamed of what we are. As sentient beings we have wonderful backgrounds. These backgrounds may not be particularly enlightened or peaceful or intelligent. Nevertheless, we have soil good enough to cultivate; we can plant anything in it. Therefore, in dealing with this subject we are not condemning or attempting to eliminate our ego-psychology; we are purely acknowledging it, seeing it as it is. In fact, the understanding of ego is the foundation of Buddhism. So let us look at how ego develops.

Fundamentally there is just open space, the *basic ground*, what we really are. Our most fundamental state of mind, before the creation of ego, is such that there is basic openness, basic freedom, a spacious quality; and we have now and have always had this openness. Take, for example, our everyday lives and thought patterns. When we see an object, in the first instant there is a sudden perception which has no logic or conceptualization to it at all; we just perceive the thing in the open ground. Then immediately we panic and begin to rush about trying to add something to it, either trying to find a name for it or trying to find pigeon-holes in which we could locate and categorize it. Gradually things develop from there.

This development does not take the shape of a solid entity.

Rather, this development is illusory, the mistaken belief in a "self" or "ego." Confused mind is inclined to view itself as a solid, on-going thing, but it is only a collection of tendencies, events. In Buddhist terminology this collection is referred to as the Five Skandhas or Five Heaps. So perhaps we could go through the whole development of the Five Skandhas.

The beginning point is that there is open space, belonging to no one. There is always primordial intelligence connected with the space and openness. *Vidya*, which means "intelligence" in Sanskrit—precision, sharpness, sharpness with space, sharpness with room in which to put things, exchange things. It is like a spacious hall where there is room to dance about, where there is no danger of knocking things over or tripping over things, for there is completely open space. We are this space, we are *one* with it, with *vidya*, intelligence and openness.

But if we are this all the time, where did the confusion come from, where has the space gone, what has happened? Nothing has happened, as a matter of fact. We just became too active in that space. Because it is spacious, it brings inspiration to dance about; but our dance became a bit too active, we began to spin more than was necessary to express the space. At this point we became *self-conscious*, conscious that "I" am dancing in the space.

At such a point, space is no longer space as such. It becomes solid. Instead of being one with the space, we feel solid space as a separate entity, as tangible. This is the first experience of duality—space and I, I am dancing in this space, and this spaciousness is a solid, separate thing. Duality means "space and I," rather than being completely one with the space. This is the birth of "form," of "other."

Then a kind of blackout occurs, in the sense that we forget what we were doing. There is a sudden halt, a pause; and we turn around and "discover" solid space, as though we had never before done anything at all, as though we were not the creators of all that solidity. There is a gap. Having already created solidified space, then we are overwhelmed by it and begin to become lost in it. There is a blackout and then, suddenly, an awakening.

When we awaken, we refuse to see the space as openness, refuse to see its smooth and ventilating quality. We completely ignore it, which is called *avidya*. *A* means "negation," *vidya* means "intelligence," so it is "un-intelligence." Because this extreme intelligence has been transformed into the perception of solid space, because this intelligence with a sharp and precise and flowing luminous quality has become static, therefore it is called *avidya*, "ignorance." We deliberately ignore. We are not satisfied just to dance in the space but we want to have a partner, and so we choose the space as our partner. If you choose space as your partner in the dance, then of course you want it to dance with you. In order to possess it as a partner, you have to solidify it and ignore its flowing, open quality. This is *avidya*, ignorance, ignoring the intelligence. It is the culmination of the First Skandha, the creation of Ignorance-Form.

In fact, this skandha, the skandha of Ignorance-Form, has three different aspects or stages which we could examine through the use of another metaphor. Suppose in the beginning there is an open plain without any mountains or trees, completely open land, a simple desert without any particular characteristics. That is how we are, what we are. We are very simple and basic. And yet there is a sun shining, a moon shining, and there will be lights and colors, the texture of the

desert. There will be some feeling of the energy which plays between heaven and earth. This goes on and on.

Then, strangely, there is suddenly someone to notice all this. It is as if one of the grains of sand had stuck its neck out and begun to look around. We are that grain of sand, coming to the conclusion of our separateness. This is the "Birth of Ignorance" in its first stage, a kind of chemical reaction. Duality has begun.

The second stage of Ignorance-Form is called "The Ignorance Born Within." Having noticed that one is separate, then there is the feeling that one has always been so. It is an awkwardness, the instinct toward self-consciousness. It is also one's excuse for remaining separate, an individual grain of sand. It is an aggressive type of ignorance, though not exactly aggressive in the sense of anger; it has not developed as far as that. Rather it is aggression in the sense that one feels awkward, unbalanced, and so one tries to secure one's ground, create a shelter for oneself. It is the attitude that one is a confused and separate individual, and that is all there is to it. One has identified oneself as separate from the basic landscape of space and openness.

The third type of ignorance is "Self-Observing Ignorance," watching oneself. There is a sense of seeing oneself as an external object, which leads to the first notion of "other." One is beginning to have a relationship with a so-called "external" world. This is why these three stages of ignorance constitute the Skandha of Form-Ignorance; one is beginning to create the world of forms.

When we speak of "ignorance" we do not mean stupidity at all. In a sense, ignorance is very intelligent, but it is a completely two-way intelligence. That is to say, one purely reacts to one's projections rather than just seeing what is. There is

no situation of "letting be" at all, because one is ignoring what one is all the time. That is the basic definition of ignorance.

The next development is the setting up of a defense mechanism to protect our ignorance. This defense mechanism is Feeling, the Second Skandha. Since we have already ignored open space, we would like next to feel the qualities of solid space in order to bring complete fulfillment to the grasping quality we are developing. Of course space does not mean just bare space, for it contains color and energy. There are tremendous, magnificent displays of color and energy, beautiful and picturesque. But we have ignored them altogether. Instead there is just a solidified version of that color; and the color becomes captured color, and the energy becomes captured energy, because we have solidified the whole space and turned it into "other." So we begin to reach out and feel the qualities of "other." By doing this we reassure ourselves that we exist. "If I can feel that out there, then I must be here."

Whenever anything happens, one reaches out to feel whether the situation is seductive or threatening or neutral. Whenever there is a sudden separation, a feeling of not knowing the relationship of "that" to "this," we tend to feel for our ground. This is the extremely efficient feeling mechanism that we begin to set up, the Second Skandha.

The next mechanism to further establish ego is the Third Skandha, Perception-Impulse. We begin to be fascinated by our own creation, the static colors and the static energies. We want to relate to them, and so we begin gradually to explore our creation.

In order to explore efficiently there must be a kind of switchboard system, a controller of the feeling mechanism. Feeling transmits its information to the central switchboard,

which is the act of perception. According to that information, we make judgments, we react. Whether we should react for or against or indifferently is automatically determined by this bureaucracy of feeling and perception. If we feel the situation and find it threatening, then we will push it away from us. If we find it seductive, then we will draw it to us. If we find it neutral, we will be indifferent. These are the three types of impulse: hatred, desire, and stupidity. Thus perception refers to receiving information from the outside world and impulse refers to our response to that information.

The next development is the Fourth Skandha, Concept. Perception-Impulse is an automatic reaction to intuitive feeling. However, this kind of automatic reaction is not really enough of a defense to protect one's ignorance and guarantee one's security. In order to really protect and deceive oneself completely, properly, one needs intellect, the ability to name and categorize things. Thus we label things and events as being "good," "bad," "beautiful," "ugly," and so on, according to which impulse we find appropriate to them.

So the structure of ego is gradually becoming heavier and heavier, stronger and stronger. Up to this point ego's development has been purely an action and reaction process; but from now on ego gradually develops beyond the ape instinct and becomes more sophisticated. We begin to experience intellectual speculation, confirming or interpreting ourselves, putting ourselves into certain logical, interpretive situations. The basic nature of intellect is quite logical. Obviously there will be the tendency to work for a positive condition: to confirm our experience, to interpret weakness into strength, to fabricate a logic of security, to confirm our ignorance.

In a sense, it might be said that the primordial intelligence is operating all the time, but it is being employed by the

dualistic fixation, ignorance. In the beginning stages of the development of ego this intelligence operates as the intuitive sharpness of feeling. Later it operates in the form of intellect. Actually it seems that there is no such thing as the ego at all; there is no such thing as "I am." It is an accumulation of a lot of stuff. It is a "brilliant work of art," a product of the intellect which says, "Let's give it a name, let's call it something, let's call it 'I am'," which is very clever. "I" is the product of intellect, the label which unifies into one whole the disorganized and scattered development of ego.

The last stage of the development of ego is the Fifth Skandha, Consciousness. At this level an amalgamation takes place: the intuitive intelligence of the Second Skandha, the energy of the Third, and the intellectualization of the Fourth combine to produce thoughts and emotions. Thus at the level of the Fifth Skandha we find the Six Realms as well as the uncontrollable and illogical patterns of discursive thought.

This is the complete picture of ego. It is in this state that all of us have arrived at our study of Buddhist psychology and meditation.

In Buddhist literature there is a metaphor commonly used to describe this whole process, the creation and development of ego. It speaks of a monkey locked in an empty house, a house with five windows representing the five senses. This monkey is inquisitive, poking its head out of each window and jumping up and down, up and down, restlessly. He is a captive monkey in an empty house. It is a solid house, rather than the jungle in which the monkey leapt and swung, rather than the trees in which he could hear the wind moving and the rustling of the leaves and branches. All these things have become completely solidified. In fact, the jungle itself has become his solid house, his prison. Instead of perching in a

tree, this inquisitive monkey has been walled in by a solid world, as if a flowing thing, a dramatic and beautiful waterfall, had suddenly been frozen. This frozen house, made of frozen colors and energies, is completely still. This seems to be the point where time begins as past, future and present. The flux of things becomes solid tangible time, a solid idea of time.

The inquisitive monkey awakens from his blackout, but he does not awaken completely. He awakens to find himself trapped inside of a solid, claustrophobic house with just five windows. He becomes bored, as though captured in a zoo behind iron bars, and he tries to explore the bars by climbing up and down. That he has been captured is not particularly important; but the idea of capture is magnified a thousand times because of his fascination with it. If one is fascinated, the sense of claustrophobia becomes more and more vivid, more and more acute, because one begins to explore one's imprisonment. In fact fascination is part of the reason he remains imprisoned. He is captured by his fascination. Of course at the beginning there was the sudden blackout which confirmed his belief in a solid world. But now having taken solidity for granted, he is trapped by his involvement with it.

Of course this inquisitive monkey does not explore all the time. He begins to become agitated, begins to feel that something is very repetitive and uninteresting, and he begins to become neurotic. Hungry for entertainment, he tries to feel and appreciate the texture of the wall, attempting to make sure that this seeming solidity is really solid. Then, assured that the space is solid, the monkey begins to relate to it by grasping it, repelling it or ignoring it. If he attempts to grasp the space in order to possess it as his own experience, his own discovery, his own understanding, this is desire. Or, if the



space seems a prison to him so that he tries to kick and batter his way out, fighting harder and harder, then this is hatred. Hatred is not just the mentality of destruction alone; but it is even more a feeling of defensiveness, defending oneself against claustrophobia. The monkey does not necessarily feel that there is an opponent or enemy approaching; he simply wants to escape his prison.

Finally the monkey might try to ignore that he is imprisoned or that there is something seductive in his environment. He plays deaf and dumb and so is indifferent and slothful in relation to what is happening around him. This is stupidity.

To go back a bit, you might say that the monkey is born into his house as he awakens from the blackout. He does not know how he arrived in this prison, so he assumes he has always been there, forgetting that he himself solidified the space into walls. Then he feels the texture of the walls, which is the Second Skandha, Feeling. After that, he relates to the house in terms of desire, hatred, and stupidity, the Third Skandha, Perception-Impulse. Then, having developed these three ways of relating to his house, the monkey begins to label and categorize it: "This is a window. This corner is pleasant. That wall frightens me and is bad." He develops a conceptual framework with which to label and categorize and evaluate his house, his world, according to whether he desires, hates, or feels indifferent to it. This is the Fourth Skandha, Concept.

The monkey's development through the Fourth Skandha has been fairly logical and predictable. But the pattern of development begins to break down as he enters the Fifth Skandha, Consciousness. The thought pattern becomes irregular and unpredictable and the monkey begins to hallucinate, to dream.

When we speak of "hallucination" or "dream," it means that we attach values to things and events which they do not necessarily have. We have definite opinions about the way things are and should be. This is projection: we project our version of things onto what is there. Thus we become completely immersed in a world of our own creation, a world of conflicting values and opinions. Hallucination, in this sense, is a misinterpretation of things and events, reading into the phenomenal world meanings which it does not have.

This is what the monkey begins to experience at the level of the Fifth Skandha. Having tried to get out and having failed, he feels dejected, helpless, and so he begins to go completely insane. Because he is so tired of struggling, it is very tempting for him to relax and let his mind wander and hallucinate. This is the creation of the Six *Lokas* or Six Realms. There is a great deal of discussion in the Buddhist tradition about hell beings, people in heaven, the human world, the animal realm, and other psychological states of being. These are the different kinds of projections, the dream worlds we create for ourselves.

Having struggled and failed to escape, having experienced claustrophobia and pain, this monkey begins to wish for something good, something beautiful and seductive. So the first realm he begins to hallucinate is the *Deva Loka*, the God Realm, "heaven," a place filled with beautiful, splendid things. The monkey dreams of strolling out of his house, walking in luxuriant fields, eating ripe fruit, sitting and swinging in the trees, living a life of freedom and ease.

Then he also begins to hallucinate the *Asura* Realm, or the Realm of the Jealous Gods. Having experienced the dream of heaven, the monkey wants to defend and maintain his great

bliss and happiness. He suffers from paranoia, worrying that others may try to take his treasures from him, and so he begins to feel jealousy. He is proud of himself, has enjoyed his creation of the God Realm, and this has led him into jealousy of the Asura Realm.

Then he also perceives the earth-bound quality of these experiences. Instead of simply alternating between jealousy and pride, he begins to feel comfortable, at home in the "human world," the "earthy world." It is the world of just leading a regular life, doing things ordinarily, in a mundane fashion. This is the Human Realm.

But then the monkey also senses that something is a bit dull, something is not quite flowing. This is because, as he progresses from the Realm of the Gods to the Realm of the Jealous Gods to the Realm of Human Beings and his hallucinations become more and more solid, then this whole development begins to feel rather heavy and stupid. At this point he is born into the Animal Realm. He would rather crawl or moo or bark than enjoy the pleasure of pride or envy. This is the simplicity of the animals.

Then the process is intensified, and the monkey starts to experience a desperate feeling of starvation, because he really does not want to descend to any lower realms. He would like to return to the pleasure realms of the gods; so he begins to feel hunger and thirst, a tremendous feeling of nostalgia for what he remembers once having had. This is the Realm of the Hungry Ghosts or *Preta* Realm.

Then there is a sudden losing of faith and the monkey begins to doubt himself and his world, begins to react violently. All this is a terrible nightmare. He realizes that such a nightmare could not be true and he begins to hate himself

for creating all this horror. This is the dream of the Hell Realm, the last of the Six Realms.

Throughout the entire development of the Six Realms the monkey has experienced discursive thoughts, ideas, fantasies, and whole thought patterns. Up to the level of the Fifth Skandha his process of psychological evolution has been very regular and predictable. From the First Skandha each successive development arose in a systematic pattern, like an overlay of tiles on a roof. But now the monkey's state of mind becomes very distorted and disturbed, as suddenly this mental jigsaw puzzle erupts and his thought patterns become irregular and unpredictable. This seems to be our state of mind as we come to the teachings and the practice of meditation. This is the place from which we must start our practice.

I think that it is very important to discuss the basis of the path—ego, our confusion—before we speak of liberation and freedom. If I were only to discuss the experience of liberation, that would be very dangerous. This is why we begin by considering the development of ego. It is a kind of psychological portrait of our mental states. I am afraid this has not been an especially beautiful talk, but we have to face the facts. That seems to be the process of working on the path.

Q: Could you say something more about what you mean by the "blackout?"

A: It is nothing particularly profound. It is just that at the level of the First Skandha we have worked very hard on trying to solidify space. We have worked so hard and with such speed that intelligence suddenly collapses. This could be said to be a kind of reverse satori, reverse enlightenment experience, the experience of ignorance. You suddenly go into

a trance, because you have worked so hard. This is something which you have actually *achieved*, a masterpiece, all this solidity. And having achieved it completely, then suddenly you are overwhelmed by it. It is a meditation of its kind, a sort of reverse samadhi.

Q: Do you think that people have to be aware of death in order actually to be alive?

A: I don't think you have to be particularly aware of death, in the sense of analyzing it, but you just have to see what you are. Often we tend to look for the positive side, the beauty of spirituality, and ignore ourselves as we are. This is the greatest danger. If we are engaged in self-analysis, our spiritual practice is trying to find some ultimate analysis, an ultimate self-deception. Ego's intelligence is tremendously talented. It can distort anything. If one seizes on the ideas of spirituality or self-analysis or transcendence of ego, immediately ego takes hold of them and translates them into self-deception.

Q: When the monkey starts to hallucinate, is it something he has known before? Where does hallucination come from?

A: It is a kind of instinct, a secondary instinct, the ape instinct that we all have. If there is pain, then one will hallucinate pleasure, by contrast. There is the urge to defend oneself, establish one's territory.

Q: Equipped only with the level of consciousness we now have, are we not doomed to fight and struggle hopelessly at this level, unless we can get back to the space you have been describing?

A: Of course we are going to fight all the time, there is no end. We could go on talking forever about the succession of struggles we will endure. There is no other answer at all, except just as you said, trying to find the primordial space again. Otherwise we are stuck in the psychological attitude of *this* as opposed to *that*, which is an obstacle. We are always fighting an opponent. There is never a moment when we give up fighting. The problem is duality, warfare in terms of I and my opponent.

The practice of meditation is a completely different way of working. One has to change one's whole attitude and way of conducting life. One has to change all one's policies, so to speak. This could be very painful. Suddenly one begins to realize, "If I do not fight, how am I going to deal with my enemies? It is all very well for me not to fight, but what about them? They are still going to be there." That is the interesting point.

Q: To see the wall and recognize that you are there and not go further—it seems like a very dangerous position.

A: That is precisely it; it isn't dangerous. It might be painful at the time to realize that the wall is solid and that you are trapped inside it, but that is the interesting point.

Q: But weren't you just saying that it is instinctive to want to return to the other state, the open space?

A: Of course, but this monkey will not let himself just *be* anymore. He continually fights, or else he is involved in hallucinations. He never stops, never allows himself to actually feel anything properly. That is the problem. That is why simply stopping, just allowing a gap, is the first step in the practice of meditation.



Q: Say you have a barrier, an inhibition, and you are very aware of it. Should the inhibition just disappear through your awareness of it?

A: The whole point is that we must not attempt to figure out how we are going to escape our dilemma, but for now we must think about all these claustrophobic rooms that we are in. This is the first step to learning. We have to actually identify ourselves and feel ourselves properly. This will provide us with inspiration for further study. We had better not speak of getting free yet.

Q: Would you say that these claustrophobic rooms were intellectual fabrications?

A: The intensity of the primordial intelligence triggers us off all the time. All these activities of the monkey are, therefore, not to be regarded as something we should escape but as something which is a product of primordial intelligence. The more we try to struggle, the more we will discover that the walls really are solid. The more energy we put into struggle, by that much will we strengthen the walls, because the walls need our attention to solidify them. Whenever we pay more attention to the walls, we begin to feel the hopelessness of escape.

Q: What does the monkey perceive when he looks out of the five windows of the house?

A: Well, he perceives the east, west, south and north.

Q: How do they look to him?

A: A square world.

Q: What about outside the house?

A: Well, a square world, because he sees through windows.

Q: He doesn't see anything in the distance?

A: He could, but it is also a square picture, because it is like hanging a picture on the wall, isn't it?

Q: What happens to the monkey when he takes a little LSD or peyote?

A: He has already taken it.