

rather, merely our concepts of them. One finds now a growing awareness that what we *think* of reality is nothing more than an idea. It is the painful recognition that what we *conceive* about everything—our ideas of ourselves, our world, even our Hinayana path—is nothing more than our own contrived versions. And our conceptual versions of things have no actual reality, they are like a dream, a mirage, or an echo. They are a facsimile, but not the real thing.

But if our concepts of things are nothing more than our own concocted versions, then what does this say about reality? Is there, then, no such thing as reality at all? Ultimate bodhichitta may reveal the illusory or “empty” nature of our version of the world, but this does not mean that there is nothing there at all. In fact, at a deeper level, ultimate *bodhichitta* is the awareness of a reality that is so intense, so boundless, and so ungraspable that the most accurate way to speak of it is to say nothing at all. Thus, in Tibetan Buddhism, one speaks of the “emptiness” of ultimate reality, which does not mean that it is a total void, but rather that it is utterly beyond our ability to speak or think about it. But, through the path, we can most surely touch it and taste it, although such “experience” does not occur within the framework of ego.

EGOLESSNESS IN THE MAHAYANA

The ego, the self or *atman*, as understood at the Hinayana level, is what we think about ourselves and our gross concepts of who we are. For example, my thoughts of myself as a certain kind of person are part of what Buddhism means by ego. “I am such-and-such; I am good at this; I am not good at that; I fit into the world here and not there.” These are all examples of ego as defined in the Hinayana.

In the Mahayana, however, ego also includes solidified, frozen versions of the “self” of other things. For example, my ideas of who my wife is and who my children are, the ideas I have about others wherein I divide them into friends and enemies are also aspects of ego. Beyond this, I have concepts of virtually everything I encounter in my world. All these are part of what is meant by self or ego. “Ego in the Maha-

yana sense, then, refers to any solidified, conceptualized “self” that I may attribute to anything.

In the Mahayana, the ego further includes, on a more subtle level, even the way I perceive things with my senses. For example, when I see, hear, smell, taste, or touch something, I am bringing subtle concepts to bear. When I look at a face, before I even formulate the concept “friend” or “enemy,” there is an experience of familiarity or unfamiliarity in my very perception. I see a face, and within that very perception is the experience that I know that this person or that person is a stranger. When I hear the song of a bird outside my window, the sound is familiar—I know it to be that of a bird. Even these subtle levels of perception are included in the Mahayana notion of ego.

It may make sense to call my more or less rigid ideas of myself “ego,” but why refer to my experience of what is other than myself—other people, things, perceptions—by the same term? The reason is that what I *think of as other, what I seem to experience* as other, is in fact only another facet of myself. How can that be? Because when I look at my wife, it is my concept of my wife that I see. When I look at a tree, it is my idea of a tree that I encounter, one that is based on all the experiences I have had of trees throughout my lifetime. Does this mean that there is no such thing as my wife beyond my concept, the tree beyond my concept? No, it does not. But it means that as long as I am operating from the centralized standpoint of ego, as long as I am cycling in samsara, I do not see the real person or the real tree, only my manufactured versions of them.

Egolessness of Self

In order to make sense of these various dimensions of “ego,” Tibetan Buddhism, as a Mahayana tradition, talks about “twofold egolessness” and the corresponding “two veils” of our ignorance. First is the “veil of conflicting emotions” that needs to be eliminated leading to the first kind of egolessness, the egolessness of self. Second is the “veil of knowables,” the removal of which yields the egolessness of phenomena, or *dharms*. The Hinayana path is directed toward the removal of the veil