

of conflicting emotions that brings about the realization of the egolessness of self. It is the recognition that the “I” or “me” that I have imagined throughout my life, that I have tried to protect, augment, and aggrandize, in fact does not exist. As Kalu Rinpoche says, it is “the subject’s own experience of the self’s nonexistence: the self or ‘me’ has no inherent existence.” [This “self” is driven and maintained through the three conflicting emotions or “poisons” (*visha*), passion, aggression, and delusion. Through passion, we attempt to draw into our world those things that confirm our idea of who we are. In a similar fashion, through aggression we try to push away and destroy those things that call our ego into question. Likewise we maintain our egos through ignorance by avoiding or ignoring those things in our environment that do not directly confirm us or threaten us. Through Hinayana practice, the cycle of passion, aggression, and delusion is slowed down, and we begin to glimpse the gaps in our own state of mind and to realize that we do not exist as a solid and continuous entity. Thus the veil of conflicting emotions is beginning to fall apart.]

Egolessness of Dharmas, or Phenomena

Although we may begin to see and accept our own lack of substantial existence, we will still look at the world and see it as a familiar place, a place that more or less accords with our own preconceptions. This apparent familiarity points to the veil of knowables. The earth, the sky, trees, animals, people, streets, buildings—all appear as things we are familiar with and know about. This is, as mentioned, a more subtle level of “self,” and it is this level that is specifically addressed in the Mahayana practice. In the Mahayana, one comes to realize the *emptiness* or egolessness of all of the phenomena that we experience in our lives, from the most gross to the most minute, including our ideas as well as our perceptions.

How is emptiness actually experienced? Usually, when we attach labels to things in the world that we perceive, we assume that the labeled perception is what we have actually experienced at the most basic level. Again, through the three *prajnas*, we discover that the matter is not this simple. Through the first *prajna*, we are taught that when we perceive

things, we immediately attribute to them an “essence” or “self-nature.” This is the basic identity that we “find” when we look at things. For example, when I look at my car, the moment it comes into view, I see it as “my car.” However, the texts tell us, the perception of “my car” comes at the end of a complex process that begins with the initial perception and is followed by various mental processes wherein I “identify,” literally attributing a particular identity to the perception.

Through the second *prajna*, *contemplation*, we reflect upon our lives and notice the many times that we have attributed an inaccurate identity to a *perception*. Examples might include seeing a person and mistakenly “recognizing” him or her to be someone we know; seeing a colored piece of paper in a field and wrongly identifying it as a brightly colored flower; attributing a motivation to someone, only to find out later how wrong we were.

It is only through the third *prajna*, *meditation*, however, that we see definitively that external objects have no “self” or “essence.” In meditating upon emptiness, we look right at our perceptions to see how they arise and what they are. When we do so, we find that they exist in a realm that is beyond any kind of identification or concept. They are “empty” of any label we might attach to them. They are, in other words, disjunct from the ideas that we project upon them.

This emptiness, then, is clearly not a mere nothing. In fact, while it dissolves the illusory, conceptualized versions that we all carry around, it brings into view a reality that appears but has no substantial or conceptualizable *essence*. This is the level of reality that is hidden from ordinary sight. Within the Buddhist context, it is described as the world beyond concept, *appearance that is beyond thought*. It is sometimes referred to as “pure relative truth” to distinguish it from the apparent but illusory world of conventional reality. It is a world of utter intensity and great power.

COMPASSION

Kalu Rinpoche expresses the central role of compassion in the Mahayana: