

The Vajra and the Five Wisdoms

It was Buddha Sakyamuni who started all this. He grew up in Kapilavastu where the great sage Kapila had taught his highly analytical doctrine of Samkhya. Kapila's teaching didn't look much like Buddhism. But when the young Gautama became the Tathagata Sakyamuni and needed ways to talk about how to get to where he was at, how to get enlightened, he found himself taking a leaf from Kapila's book.

So many of the Buddha's teachings have this element of analysis. So very often, he broke dharma principles down into groups - the eight of this, the four of this, the sixty four of this, the ten of that. For this reason, followers were sometimes known as the Vaibhajjiavadins, the Analysers.

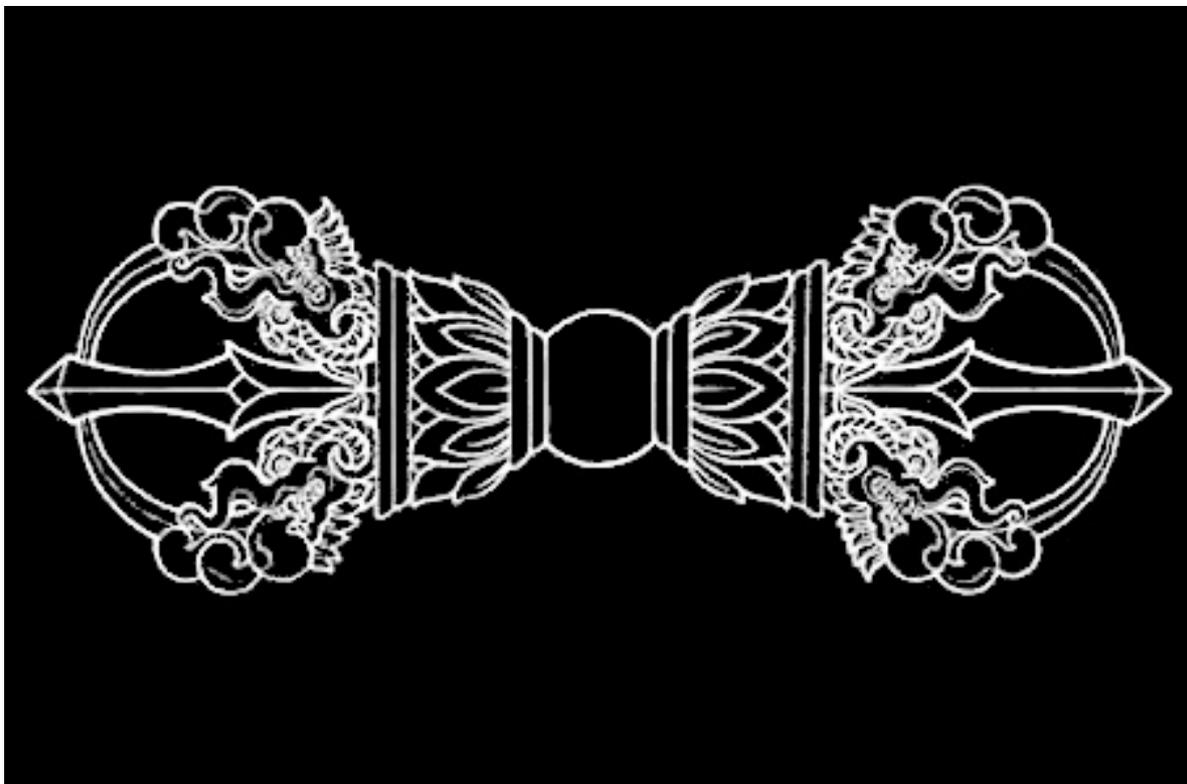
His first teaching at the Deer Park to the five ascetics, the dhammachakkhapatana sutta, was a general overview of the whole path he had traversed — the middle way, the four truths, the eightfold path, and proclaimed that he had realised nirvana. It was big talk with a lot of words. Great content, of course, but a lot of it. And also lots of devas shouting up to different levels of the devaloka that the wheel of dhamma had been set in motion, etc. A lot has been said about that sutta, and I remember when I was a neophyte— back even before we had mitras— I found all this very exciting and inspiring.

But nowadays I'm more moved by the second teaching the Buddha gave, which you hardly hear about, even though it happened just afterwards in the same Deer Park, with the same five ascetics. So even though the Dhammachakka pravatana Sutta was the first teaching of the dharma in theory and in principle, this was the first experiential, hands on teaching. And the atmosphere is a lot quieter. It is much more simple, much more basic, and it is hair-raisingly direct. He pointed straight at this mind, this existence, now. This was where the teaching needed to start.

In the sutta, the Buddha uses the framework of the five Skandhas to point out the nature of the mind. He analyses our existence into five basic strands. Just like we were experiencing earlier, when we let our eyes wander with a softer focus, there is simply consciousness, then there are forms arising in consciousness, then there's our perception and recognition of those forms, then all the feelings that arise, and finally all the wants and avoidances that then propel us into different realms of experience. Consciousness, form, feeling, perception and volition are the five skandhas. The Buddha went into the nature of each one in a dialogue with his community of practitioners, eventually making it obvious that

each skandha is empty of self nature. This was the earliest Abhidharma style teaching.

A thousand years later, along comes the Vajrayana. Buddhism has been through institutionalisation after institutionalisation. With interpretations of the Buddha's teaching that sometimes were very dogmatic and conservative, at other times really quite vague and impossibly idealistic. Not always of course. Many things happened. But it seems unavoidable that we always need institutions and these can at times be stultifying. But then what happens, you get a fringe and eventually it's there that the interesting innovative material can thrive. So in this time, a non monastic practice movement had been growing over many decades, operating outside the institutions, in the forest and in the villages with the common people and independent yogis, and what they are thinking was simply this: 'It is possible to realise awakening in this very life if we set our minds to it'. And in its explorations, this new era of Buddhism hits upon this first practical teaching of the emptiness of the five skandhas. The five skandhas are this very life. The five skandhas are our essential experience: body and mind. And the emptiness of the five skandhas means that they can be transformed, they are essentially free. So this is how the Vajrayana took as its emblem the vajra or thunderbolt.



At one end of the vajra were the five skandhas, and at the other end were the five wisdoms. So at one end of the process of practice are the ever present skandhas, and at the other end are the five wisdoms which are

also ever present, but unrealised. They are not noticed, they are not recognised. In a way the five skandhas are also unrealised, in that we don't particularly notice them or take them into account either. Realising that the five ever present skandhas make up what we essentially are would, in fact, be part of the waking up process that would start to awaken the five wisdoms as well. When we start to look into the nature of consciousness, the nature of form, the nature of feeling, recognition and volition, then the five wisdoms that correspond to each of these investigations start showing themselves, at least in potential. We start to see the pathways to them. It is as though when we look carefully, the Five Skandhas each become introductions to the Five wisdoms.

The five skandhas had been taken up much earlier by the monastic systematisers of the Dharma, the people who created the Abhidharma and its analysis of experience. In the Abhidharma, the five skandhas became the five omnipresent mental events, what Subhuti calls the 'constants'. The five omnipresent mental events are what make up any mind situation, and we'll look into them tomorrow from that perspective. Tonight I want to stick with the earliest formulation, the skandhas, and their transformation into the five wisdoms. Because it's a reality that underlies any mind situation.

The five wisdoms are considered by the Vajrayana to be inherent. They are to be revealed by looking into our present experience. What particularly characterises the Vajrayana is the immanent or Buddha Nature perspective, I think what Subhuti calls the third myth or is it the fourth... in Vajrayana that also involves an emphasis on the body being the main vehicle for awakening. On the energy of awakening. Because the body holds the potential—in the body are stored all the seeds of everything that ever happened to us, and changes in the mind are mirrored in the body. Body is not considered separate from the mind, both are aspects of the same reality.

That is why in terms of the five wisdoms, which I'm going to finish with tonight, the body and its energy corresponds to the all accomplishing wisdom, the active energetic expression of wisdom. Wisdom is realisation and the body simply expresses any realisation, even if it just a raising of the eyebrows or a smile or at the other end of the scale, it's maybe a lifetime of creative activity. Body always expresses mind and so the body expresses wisdom as well. It is the energy of wisdom. In the mandala this is usually wisdom no.5

It's helpful to remember that wisdom is always, in some way, realisation of sunyata. Sunyata is the central and most basic realisation, so it's usually placed in the middle of the mandala. It is clear seeing that things are not

what they seem, that things are impermanent and without fixed nature of any kind. This is the dharmadhatu wisdom, the no.1 essential wisdom. Then, no2., what is perceived by the mind cannot truly be separated from that mind, even though it appears to be outside it. When we look out of the window whatever we see is coloured by whoever is seeing it, whether they're grumpy or glad. When we gaze into a computer monitor, or when we look at our phone, the experience is however we are that day. When things appear in a mirror the reflection moves to match whatever is looking in the mirror, in a completely smooth, accurate correspondence. Just like life. Hence this is called the Mirror Like wisdom. The distinction between the self we feel is here and the other we feel is out there, is in fact empty, even though they always seem to mirror one another so smoothly.

Then no3., what is also empty, and this is a relief, is the distinction between what we think of as samsara and as nirvana. We tend to think it is an absolute distinction, and should be as well. But that is only the concepts, which are of course different. The concepts of samsara and awakening are very distinct. But when we look closely at the actual nature of samsara and awakening, it isn't so. It is similar to the way that the body holds the key to awakening. You look at it one way, and it's just an ugly old lump that won't do all the things we try and get it to do. Look at it another way though, and the body is absolutely the key, and that is more than beautiful. Same body, different viewpoint. The body representing both samsara, cyclic habit, and nirvana, the energy of creative realisation. Another example: our mind cannot be separated from its nature. Our mind, a nest of bad habits; our mind, the Bodhicitta. Mind may be involved with samsara, but it is of a nature that it is capable of awakening, and these two are inseparable in the same mind. Seeing this truth of samsara and nirvana inseparable produces a relaxation of the heart and we realise that to move towards awakening, we actually need to relax into the qualities of our experience, including the ones that we reject as 'unspiritual,' and feel them as they are, rather than rejecting experience—because they all equally have this same quality, of potentially being both samsara and nirvana. Hence the wisdom of equality or sameness.

Finally no.4, (remember we started with no.5) the Discriminating Wisdom. To discriminate means to be precise about how things are and how they exist, and not being fooled by appearances. Things appear to us as they do because there has been a huge long involved process of labeling and assumption tacked on to the world, a collective process which we have joined in with and added our own colouring. The Discriminating Wisdom just won't take this, it can see the dukkha and the deception that is involved and it pulls back, and insists on precision and clarity. This quality can be found in undoing the damage done by the skandha of perception. The quality of the wisdom of samsara and nirvana being inseparable can

be found in reaching out more into the skandha of feeling.

The quality of the wisdom of the mirror like inseparability of the perceiver and the perceived, can be found, at least in its beginnings, in the skandha of form - the form that appears to us.

The quality of the wisdom of the energy of realising sunyata is to be found in the skandha of volition.

And the quality of the wisdom of realising sunyata itself can be found by looking at awareness itself.