

# TRANSFORMATION AT THE BASE

## Thich Nhat Hanh

### INTRODUCTION

The twelfth-century Vietnamese Zen master Thuong Chieu ("Always Shining") said, "When we understand how our mind works, the practice becomes easy." This is a book on Buddhist psychology, offered to help us see how the mind works through understanding the nature of consciousness. These Fifty Verses can be seen as a kind of road map to the path of practice. Through meditation, the Buddha came to understand his own mind deeply, and for more than two thousand five hundred years his followers have learned how to take care of their own minds and bodies in order to obtain transformation and peace.

The Fifty Verses draw upon the most important streams of Buddhist thought in India, from the Abhidharma teachings of the Pali Canon (1) to later Mahayana teachings such as the Avatamsaka Sutra. The development of Indian Buddhist philosophy and doctrine is generally divided into three periods, Source Buddhism, Many-Schools Buddhism, and Mahayana Buddhism.(2) The Fifty Verses contain elements from the teachings of all three periods.

The Abhidharma (literally, "Super Dharma") is a primary text of Source Buddhism. A hundred and forty years after the Buddha's parinirvana ("great passing away"), the Sangha (3) underwent a division into two streams, the Sthaviras (4) and the Mahasanghikas. This marked the transition into the Many-Schools period, when eighteen or twenty new schools came into being, due in most cases to disputes about various points of doctrine.<sup>(5)</sup> From the Sthaviras later arose two subsects, the Sarvastivadins and the Sautrantikas. The other main branch of Many-Schools Buddhism, the Mahasanghikas, was one of the progenitors of the third great phase of Indian Buddhism, the Mahayana (literally, "Great Vehicle") (6).

During his lifetime the Buddha was the living Dharma, but after he died his disciples were left with the task of systematizing his teachings so that they could be further studied. The Abhidharma was the first such collection, but this work continued through the centuries as Buddhist philosophy was further developed and expanded upon. In the fifth century c.E., Buddhaghosa composed a popular work of systemization, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*. (7) Around the same time, the great monk-scholar Vasubandhu compiled a summary and commentary of the Buddha's teachings called the *Treasury of Super Dharma (Abhidharma-kosha-bhashya)*. (8)

Vasubandhu practiced with a number of Buddhist schools around Gandhara in what is now North Pakistan. Then he went north to Kashmir, the center of the Sarvastivada school (which formed the basis of much of early Chinese Buddhism). The Sarvastivadins allowed only Kashmiris to study and practice with them, however, so Vasubandhu disguised himself in order to receive their teachings. After completing his studies with the Sarvastivadins, Vasubandhu composed the *Abhidharma-kosha-bhashya*. His teachers saw that he had a great understanding of the teachings of their tradition, but they didn't realize that the *Abhidharma-kosha-bhashya* also included teachings from the Sautrantika and other schools.

Vasubandhu had a half-brother, Asanga, who was an accomplished Mahayana Buddhist monk. He composed an important treatise on the Abhidharma from a Mahayana perspective, the *Mahayana-samgraha-shastra*.(9) Asanga often spoke to Vasubandhu of the significance of the Mahayana teachings, but Vasubandhu remained skeptical. He appreciated the teachings and practice of the Many-

Schools tradition, but he felt that later developments, including the Mahayana, were not authentic Buddhism. Then one full-moon night, as Vasubandhu was practicing walking meditation, he came across Asanga standing by a clear pond chanting Mahayana teachings. Suddenly, Vasubandhu had a breakthrough into the depth and beauty of the Great Vehicle and from that moment on the two brothers practiced and taught Mahayana Buddhism together.

Vasubandhu is regarded as the patriarch and most outstanding figure of the Vijnaptimatra or Manifestation Only school, which grew out of the Yogachara school of Mahayana Buddhism.(10) He wrote commentaries on Asanga's work and he also composed two seminal treatises on the teachings of the Manifestation Only school, the Vijnaptimatrata-vimshatika-karika (Twenty Verses on the Manifestation of Consciousness) and the Vijnaptimatrata-trimshika-karika (Thirty Verses on the Manifestation of Manifestation)."(11)

Because of Vasubandhu's training in several traditions, we can see how the Manifestation Only school developed from the Abhidharma of (he Sarvastivada school and from Vasubandhu's own work, the Abhidharma-kosha-bhashya, which he wrote before coming into contact with the Mahayana. Thus the Manifestation Only school contains many elements of non-Mahayana teachings. Vasubandhu's writings have served the Great Vehicle deeply and effectively, but they never became one hundred percent Mahayana. Two centuries after his time, the Manifestation Only school was still regarded as an "interim vehicle."(12)

In the seventh century, the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang (600-664), known as "The Pilgrim," traveled to India and attended Nalanda University, the principal seat of Buddhist studies. In his chronicles of his travels in Central Asia and India, Xuanzang observed that ten thousand monks were studying at Nalanda. (13) Under the guidance of the master Shilabhadra, Xuanzang studied Manifestation Only Buddhism. Shilabhadra, then one hundred years old, was Nalanda's rector and the last of the ten illustrious "doctors" of the Manifestation Only school (Vasubandhu was the first. Another was Sthiramati.(14) Dharmapala, Shilabhadra's teacher, was the ninth).

Comparing the texts of Sthiramati and Dharmapala, we can see how their approaches to Manifestation Only differ. Vasubandhu's original commentary was also added to by Dignaga, who incorporated elements of epistemology and logic into it. This melange was the teaching that Xuanzang studied at Nalanda and later continued to study after he returned to China. He founded a school based on the teachings of the manifestation of consciousness, the Wei Shi ("Consciousness Only") school, and wrote a commentary on Vasubandhu's Thirty Verses entitled the Standard Verses on the Eight Consciousnesses.(15)g Xuanzang also put forward the idea of "three realms" of perception, a system that describes the qualities of perception that correspond to different levels of consciousness. He wrote a short poem on the three realms of perception, "The Nature of the Perceived in Itself When Not According to Our Mind," which is included in Chapter Twenty-Four of the Fifty Verses.

A decade after Xuanzang, the Chinese monk Fazang attempted to present the Manifestation-Only teachings in a completely Mahayana way. Fazang was a student of the Flower Ornament Discourse (Avatamsaka Sutra) and his important work, The Wondrous Meaning of the Avatamsaka (16) uses Flower Ornament teachings, especially the notion of "one is all, all is one," to reinforce the teachings of Manifestation Only. But Fazang's efforts were not long lasting, and no one has continued the work of presenting the Manifestation-Only teachings from a Mahayana viewpoint since his time. Even today, scholars and practitioners read the Thirty Verses without taking these important Mahayana Buddhist teachings into account.

As a novice monk, I studied and memorized Vasubandhu's Twenty and Thirty Verses in Chinese. When I came to the West, I realized that these important teachings on Buddhist psychology could open doors of understanding for people here. So, in 1990 I composed the Fifty Verses to continue to polish

the precious gems offered by the Buddha, Vasubandhu, Sthiramati, Xuanzang, Fazang, and others. After you have studied the Fifty Verses, it will be easier to understand the classic works of these great masters, and you will know which work is the basis for each of the Fifty Verses.

I have tried in this book to present the Manifestation-Only teachings in a completely Mahayana way. If, while reading, you don't understand a particular word or phrase, please don't try too hard. Allow the teachings to enter you as you might listen to music, or in the way the earth allows the rain to permeate it. If you use only your intellect to study these verses, it would be like putting plastic over the earth. But if you allow this Dharma rain to penetrate your consciousness, these Fifty Verses will offer you the whole of the Abhidharma teachings "in a nutshell."

The Manifestation-Only teachings are very subtle and complex, and one could spend an entire lifetime looking deeply into them. Please do not be daunted by their complexity. Go slowly. Try not to read too many pages in one sitting and take the time to absorb each verse and its commentary fully before moving on to the next. With mindfulness, kindness, and compassion, you will understand these teachings easily and naturally.

## NOTES

1. The Pali Canon was the first written record of the Buddha's teaching, composed in (present-day) Sri Lanka about a hundred years after the Buddha's lifetime. It is also known as the Tipitaka (Sanskrit: Tripitaka; literally, "three baskets"), comprising the Sutta-pitaka (Sanskrit: Sutra-pitaka), the original discourses of the Buddha; the Vinaya-pitaka, the monastic code; and the Abhidhamma-pitaka (Sanskrit: Abhidharma-pitakd), which is the earliest compilation of Buddhist philosophy and psychology.
2. These three periods date from the time of the Buddha in the mid-sixth to mid-fifth century b.ce. to about the seventh century c.E. For a general outline, see Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1998), chap. 4.
3. Here the term Sangha is used in its most restrictive sense, meaning the community of ordained Buddhist monastics. However, in modern usage and throughout the rest of the book, it refers to the community of Buddhist followers in general
4. The Sthaviras were the progenitors of the Theravada school (literally, "Way of the Elders"), the primary form of Buddhism found today in South and Southeast Asia.
5. For a detailed description of the various schools and their doctrinal differences see Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ann Arbor Paper-back/University of Michigan Press, 1967, 1987).
6. The Mahayana developed from around 100 b.ce. to the first century c.e. Mahayanists proposed the ideal of the bodhisattva (literally, "enlightenment-being"), who works toward the awakening of all beings, in contrast to the early Buddhist ideal of the arhat (literally, "worthy one") who focuses on his or her own liberation. Mahayana Buddhism is the most prominent form of Buddhism in China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, and parts of Vietnam.
7. Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*. Translated by Bhildchu Nanamoli, Third Edition (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1975)

8. Translated into English from Louis de La Vallee Poussin's French translation by I,ro Pruden, Abhidharma Kasha Bhashya (Fremont, CA: Asian Humanities Press, imprint of Jain Publishing Company, 1990).
9. Samgraha means compendium, summary, or essence. A shastra is a commentary. This text has been translated into French by Etienne Lamotte, La Somme du Grand Vehicule dAsanga (Louvain, Belgium: Institut Orientaliste, Editions Peeters, 1973); and into English by John P. Keenan, The Summary of The Great Vehicle (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1992).
10. Both Vijiianavada and Yogachara were early Mahayana Buddhist schools based on the study of the nature of consciousness. Vijnana means literally "mind" or "consciousness"; the school is more commonly referred to as the Mind Only or Consciousness Only school. This name is often misunderstood as a kind of idealism, however, so throughout this book I will refer to it as the Manifestation Only (Vijnaptimatra) school. The Yogachara (literally, "application of yoga") school derives its name from its emphasis on the practice of "yoga," meaning meditation, particularly the meditative practices of the perfections (paramitas), the essential qualities of a bodhisattva.
11. Vimshatika means "twenty"; trimshika means "thirty." Vijnapti means "manifestation"; matra means "only." Vijnaptimatra is thus "manifestation only." Karika is a verse that expresses a teaching concisely. These two treatises appear in a French translation, Deux traites de Vasubandhu: Vimshatika et Trimshika, translated into French by Sylvain Levi (Paris: Bibliotheque de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes, 1925) and into English by many scholars, including David J. Kalupahana, in The Principles of Buddhist Psychology (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 173-92; and Francis H. Cook, in Three Texts on Consciousness Only (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1999), "Thirty Verses on Consciousness Only" (pp. 371-83); and "The Treatise in Twenty Verses on Consciousness Only" (pp. 385-408). A Sanskrit version of the Thirty Verses was discovered by Professor Sylvain Levi in the 1920s. A translation from Vasubandhu's original Sanskrit to Chinese by Xuanzang, along with Xuan-zang's commentary, is also extant. The original Sanskrit to Tibetan has been translated into English by Stefan Anacker in his Seven Works of Vasubandhu: The Buddhist Psychological Doctor (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984, 1998), pp. 181-190.
12. The Japanese Buddhist scholar Takakusu refers to it as "semi-Mahayanistic" and "quasi-Mahayanistic" in Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1947).
13. Nalanda University, founded in the fifth century, was located about five miles north of Rajagriha, present-day Rajgir, in the north-central Indian state of Bihar. Xuanzang's account of his travels in India has been translated into English by Li Rongxi, The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1996).
14. Sylvain Levi also discovered a manuscript in Sanskrit of a commentary by Sthi-ramati on Vasubandhu's Thirty Verses and published a French translation, Materi-iiiix pour l'Etude du Systeme Vijnaptimatra, edited by Honore Champion (Paris: 1.ihrairie Ancienne, 1932). The French version was subsequently translated into English and this English version has been translated into Chinese.

15. This text as such is not found in the Taisho Tripitaka, but is included in a commentary on it by Xuanzang's disciple Putai, entitled Pa-shih Kuei-chu Pu-chu (liiisho 45,467-76). An English translation by Ronald Epstein of Xuanzang's Pa-thih Kuei-chu Sung (Verses on the Structure of the Eight Consciousnesses) can be found at <http://online.sfsu.edu/~rone/Buddlum/Yogacara/BasicVersescontents.htm>. Xuanzang's magnum opus is his commentary on Vasubandhu's "Thirty Verses," the Cheng Wei Shi Lun, which is the foundational text of the Wei Shi (Consciousness Only) school of Chinese Buddhism. This text, along with Vasubandhu's "Thirty Verses" and "Twenty Verses" (see note 11, above) has been translated into English by Francis H. Cook and published under the title "Demonstration of Consciousness Only" in *Three Texts on Consciousness Only* (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1999), pp. 7 -370
16. For more on the Avatamsaka Sutra, see Thich Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind a/ Love* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1996). See also Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1993), and Cleary's *Entry into the Inconceivable* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), pp. 147-170.