

EDWARD CONZE

The Ontology of The Prajñāpāramitā

WORKS ON *prajñāpāramitā*, "perfect wisdom," were composed by Indian Buddhists over a period of more than 1,000 years, between 100 B.C. and A.D. 1,100. The resulting literature is very extensive,¹ and, on the whole, quite unknown at present outside Japan and Tibet. Historically, it has had considerable importance. Within Buddhism it inaugurated the emergence of the Mahāyāna and continued to guide its further development. Its basic doctrines were taken up and developed by Gauḍapāda and Śaṅkarācārya and thus became a part of the Hindu tradition. The intrinsic value of the ideas embodied in this literature is, I think, commensurate to their historical effect.

It would be a mistake, of course, to regard these texts as philosophical treatises in the European sense of the word. To begin with, they do not develop their doctrine by reasoned argumentation but rely entirely on simple dogmatic affirmation. As *sūtras*, these works are held to be the word of the Buddha himself, and his authority is thought to be sufficient support for their veracity and truth. By a division of labor, the Buddhists left reasoned argumentation to another class of works, called *śāstras*. It is in the *śāstras* of the Mādhyamika school, from Nāgārjuna onward, that we must seek for anything in the nature of philosophical argumentation. Second, it is not the purpose of the texts to expound some novel view about the constitution of reality or the nature of the universe. They are religious texts and were composed to further religious emancipation or salvation. A large part of their contents is devoted to purely religious, or theological, concepts.

If ontology in the usual sense is interpreted, however, to mean any attempt to contact the true nature of reality, the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* are replete with it. The passages dealing with this ontology are scattered in writings which are still rather inaccessible. Their combination into one single argument might, therefore, be held to be a useful undertaking. For reasons of space I must confine myself, however, to a straightforward description.

¹I have given a survey of it in *The Middle Way* (London), XXVII, No. 1 (May, 1952), 20-23.

At every point, a comparison with European philosophers suggests itself with Parmenides, Pyrrho, Proclus, Sextus Empiricus, Berkeley, Hegel, etc. But that must be left to other occasions.

First of all, we must consider the earlier developments of the Buddhist theory of "*dharmas*," and of their "own-being," which led up to the *Prajñā-pāramitā* doctrine of "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*). Second, we will survey the doctrine of "emptiness" from an ontological, psychological, and logical angle. As it would be a grave mistake, however, to treat the doctrine of emptiness as a philosophical theory only, we must round off our account with a consideration of the religious motivation behind it.

DHARMAS AND THEIR OWN-BEING

In agreement with many philosophers, Buddhists assume that common-sense things around us are a false appearance. The ultimate facts of reality, technically known as *dharmas*, are different. Normally, they are covered from sight by ignorance. In order to penetrate to them, one must generate in oneself a special virtue, or force, known as "wisdom" (*prajñā*), which alone is able to attain knowledge of what the *dharmas* themselves are, of their "own-being."²

No rational approach can be content to accept the crude data of common sense as ultimate facts. The scientific propositions of modern science always refer to abstract entities, such as atoms, molecules, electromagnetic fields, etc., and to their properties, tendencies, and habitual behavior. Similarly, the Buddhist science of salvation regards the world as composed of an unceasing flow of momentary *dharmas*.

Dharmas are either conditioned or unconditioned. Only two *dharmas* are unconditioned, i.e., Nirvāṇa and space (or ether). Conditioned *dharmas* are classified into a number of groups, common to all Buddhist schools, such as the five *skandhas*, the twelve sense-fields, the eighteen elements, and the twelve links of conditioned co-production. The more scholastically minded, appalled by the untidy duplications involved, tried to draw up an over-all list of *dharmas*. The Theravādins counted 174 *dharmas*, the Sarvāstivādins seventy-nine, and the Yogācārins one hundred. The *Prajñāpāramitā* adopts none of these lists but devotes a few pages³ to the classification of *dharmas* in accordance with their nearness to enlightenment. First of all, it distin-

² Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 370.

³ N. Dutt, ed., *Pañcavimattisāhasrikā*, Calcutta Oriental Series, No. 28 (London: Luzac & Co., 1934), pp. 165-168. (Hereafter abbreviated as P.) See also P. Ghosha, ed., *Śatasāhasrikā*, Bibliotheca Indica (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, n.d.), pp. 1257-1263. (Hereafter abbreviated as Ś.)

guishes wholesome, unwholesome, and neutral *dharmas*. The wholesome are then further subdivided into worldly and supramundane, with and without outflows, conditioned and unconditioned, and common (to all saints) and uncommon (i.e., special to the Buddhas). The definition of each class consists in giving a list of its constituent members. As we shall discuss them later, I give here the definitions of "conditioned" and "unconditioned" *dharmas*:

Conditioned dharmas are: The world (dhātu) of sense-desire, the world of form, the formless world. And also any other dharmas that are included in the conditioned element (dhātu), i.e., the 37 wings of enlightenment, etc. Unconditioned dharmas are: That of which there is no production, no passing away, no alteration of stability. Extinction of greed, hate, and delusion. Suchness, Non-falsehood (avitathatā), unaltering Suchness, the true nature of dharma (dharma-tā), the element (dhātu) of dharma, the established order of dharma (dharma-sthititā), the fixed sequence of dharma (dharma-niyāmatā), the unthinkable element, the Reality-limit.^{3a}

The distinction between "*dharmas*" and "things" is implicit in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* and without it one misses their teaching completely. As a matter of fact, the first step toward wisdom, which is held to be accomplished before *perfect* wisdom can get started, consists in getting the *dharmas*, like the *skandhas*, etc., into view. This involves three steps: (1) an act of *differentiation*, the breaking up of the seemingly unified personality and of its experiences—persons and things are understood as mere conglomerations, or "heaps," of dharmic events; (2) an act of *depersonalization*, the elimination of all references to "I," "me," or "mine"; and (3) an act of *evaluation*: one must feel that description in terms of *skandhas* and *dharmas* is superior to description in ordinary terms.

When one sees the *dharmas* as they really are in themselves, one sees their "own-being" (*sva-bhāva*). The *Prajñāpāramitā* presupposes a knowledge of this term also. We are fortunate that Candrakīrti has, in his *Prasannapādā*,⁴ given a fairly elaborate philosophical account of it. According to him, Buddhist tradition uses the term "own-being" in at least three ways:

1. It may mean the essence, or special property, of a *thing*. A concrete fire is a "thing," and heat is its "own-being." This kind of own-being is defined as "that attribute which always accompanies the object, because it is not tied to anything else."⁵

^{3a} P., p. 168.

⁴ Louis de la Vallée Poussin, ed., *Bibliotheca Buddhica*, IV (St. Petersburg: Commissionnaires de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences, 1903-1914). (Hereafter abbreviated as *Pr.*)

⁵ *Pr.*, p. 241.

2. It may be the essential feature of a *dharma*.⁶ The own-being is that which carries its own mark.⁷ Each *dharma*, as a separate entity,⁸ carries one single mark, no more than one. In a sense, "own-being" and "own-mark" are, therefore, one and the same thing. In one passage⁹ the *Prajñāpāramitā* gives a survey of the "own-marks" which define thirty basic *dharmas*. The definitions concern either the function of the activities, or the effects of the entities considered. Thus, the marks of feeling, perception, impulses, and consciousness are, respectively, "experiencing, taking up, together-making, and being aware." The marks of the *skandhas*, elements, and sense-fields are that they are "suffering, venomous snakes, and doors to misfortune."

3. Finally, "own-being" may be defined as the opposite of "other-being." Then it is that which looks only to itself, and not to anything outside. It is what we call the "Absolute," compared with which all separate *dharmas* are *parabhāva* (relative). The mark (*lakṣaṇa*) of that own-being is that it is not contingent, not conditioned, not related to anything other than itself.¹⁰ Own-being, therefore, implies full and complete ownership and control.¹¹

It is now the principal teaching of *Prajñāpāramitā* with regard to own-being that it is "empty." The Sanskrit term is *svabhāvasūnya*. This is a *tatpuruṣa* compound (one in which the last member is qualified by the first without losing its grammatical independence), in which *svabhāva* may have the sense of any oblique case.¹² The Mahāyāna¹³ understands it to mean that *dharmas* are empty of any own-being, i.e., that they are not ultimate facts in their own right, but merely imagined and falsely discriminated, for each and every one of them is dependent on something other than itself. From a slightly different angle this means that *dharmas*, when viewed with perfected gnosis, reveal an own-being which is identical with emptiness, i.e., in their own-being they are empty.

⁶ In the words of Candrakīrti, the data of experience are not taken as "sprouts," etc., but as *samskāras*.

⁷ *Sva-lakṣaṇa*.

⁸ *Prthag-dharma*.

⁹ *Ś.*, pp. 1410-1411; Cf. *P.*, p. 197.

¹⁰ *Pr.*, p. 262.

¹¹ *Pr.*, p. 263, *svabhāva* is equal to *svobhāva*, *Sein an sich*. It is *ātmiya*, a term which implies rightful ownership (as of one's own slaves), as distinct from what is the property of others, or what is lent for a time only, a borrowed article.

¹² The *Sūtras*, by speaking often of *svabhāvena sūnyab*, suggest that the instrumental is the case normally present.

¹³ As distinct from the Theravādins. For them, "*svabhāva-sūñña*" means that, by reason of their own-being, *dharmas* are "empty of self." They are content to stress the absence of self in persons by treating those persons as mere conglomerations of dharmic events. The Mahāyāna then argued that, in order to get a perfect understanding of emptiness, one had also to see those ultimate events themselves as empty. In other words, ultimately, by comparison with ultimate reality, they do not exist as separate entities. The *Kātyāyana-parivarta* compares the emptiness of the old school to a termite hole—termites bore a hole into a piece of wood (absence of self in persons), but they leave, all around, thin outer walls standing (dharmic events). The new kind of emptiness, on the other hand, was compared to vast space. A. von Stael-Holstein, ed., *Kātyāyana-parivarta* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1926).

The Mahāyāna, in other words, rejects the first two kinds of own-being as mere provisional constructions. Only the third is regarded as ultimately real, as the one and only standard of truth. The own-being of all separate things or *dharmas* is obviously contingent and tied to conditions, a result of the co-operation of many conditions. Heat, as the essential feature of fire, for instance, depends on a lens, the sun, fuel, oxygen, etc. Of all this kind of own-being, one can say that "previously not having been, it is produced later on." The mere fact of change is incompatible with own-being and indicates a lack of it. The true own-being is something which would be independent of conditions and which would be owned forever, at all times. Once own-being is defined in such a way, no separate own-being can be found for the separate phenomena. "There is no own-being of a *dharma* (acting) in causal connection, because of conditioned co-production."¹⁴ "Own-being is the unpervertedness of essential nature."¹⁵ But "there are not two essential natures of *dharmas*, but just one single is the essential nature of all *dharmas*."¹⁶ In the one place where the *Prajñāpāramitā* gives a definition of *dharmas*, it defines it as "the unbroken unity of all *dharmas*."¹⁷

This basic idea can be expressed in a variety of ways: All separate *dharmas* lack an own-being (they are *niḥ-svabhāva*), and in that sense they are called empty. In a sense, one can speak of a "monism," since all multiplicity is relegated to a lower plane and denied ultimate validity. Or, each separate entity can be said to be devoid of itself.¹⁸ Or, in the same way and by the same argument, emptiness is the "own-mark" of all *dharmas*. The own-being of *dharmas* actually consists in emptiness and the absence of own-being.

EMPTINESS

The exposition of the theory of emptiness takes either the form of a description of the *ontological status* of separate *dharmas*, or of the *psychological attitudes* we should adopt toward them, or of the *logical structure* of any statements that may be made about them. We must consider these three points of view one by one.

¹⁴ *Nāsti sām̐yogikasya dharmasya svabhāva pratītya-samutpānnatvād. P., p. 197. Cf. P., p. 252: nāsti sām̐yogikāḥ svabhāvāḥ. Candrakīrti expresses the same idea by saying: sarva-dharma-pratītyasamutpāda-lakṣaṇā svabhāva-tūnyatā. Pr., p. 515.*

¹⁵ *Svabhāvo hi prakṛtir-aviparītātā. P., p. 198.*

¹⁶ R. Mitra, ed., *Aṭṭasāhasrikā*, Bibliotheca Indica, 110 (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1888), VIII, p. 192. (Hereafter abbreviated as A.)

¹⁷ *Sarva-dharmānām asambhedah. P., p. 171.*

¹⁸ E.g., form should be seen as empty of form, etc. *Śatasāhasrikā*, Cambridge Add. Ms., 1632, LIII, fol. 279b. Or, LIII, fol. 295: name is empty of name, sign is empty of sign.

A. The ontological status of *dharma*s is considered in six ways:

1. *Dharma*s are *non-existent*. "What has no own-being, that is non-existent."¹⁹ As Candrakīrti puts it: "Now this own-being of entities which is identical with Non-production [see point A-5] is at the same time pure non-being, and that in the sense that it is not anything in particular. Therefore the (absolute) own-being is a negation of the (pluralistic) own-being, and it is in this sense that one must understand our thesis that the own-being of entities is unreal."²⁰

2. *Dharma*s have a purely *nominal existence*. They are mere words,²¹ a matter of conventional expression (*vyavahāra*). "The *dharma*s on which beings seek a false support are names and signs; they are not, they are imagined, artificial adventitious designations which are added on to what is really there."²² Or, as it is put in another passage,²³ they are "mere words," and "words are merely artificial constructions, which do not represent *dharma*," but which constitute "adventitious designations, which are imagined and unreal." A *bodhisattva* "does not expect to find any realities behind those words, and, in consequence, he does not settle down in them. The *dharma*s themselves are inexpressible."²⁴ "One cannot properly express the emptiness of all *dharma*s in words."²⁵ "The Buddha is the same as speechless silence."²⁶

3. *Dharma*s are "*without marks*, with one mark only, i.e., with no mark."²⁷ A "mark" (*lakṣaṇa*) is defined as the distinctive property which keeps *dharma*s apart. The most essential mark of a *dharma* is, however, that it is empty, and this mark swallows up all the others, so that all *dharma*s have one and the same mark, i.e., to be empty.²⁸ In one very characteristic passage²⁹ Sāriputra asks, "What, then, is the own-being of form, etc.?" Subhūti answers: "Non-existence is the own-being of form, etc. It is in this sense that form is lacking in the own-being of form. And so with the other *skandhas*. Moreover, form is lacking in the mark which is characteristic of form. The mark, again, is lacking in the own-being

¹⁹ *Pañcaviṃśatīśāstrīkā*, Cambridge Add. Ms., 1628, fol. 505b.

²⁰ *Pr.*, p. 264. My translation follows S. Schayer, who has done much to clarify these doctrines in his *Ausgewählte Kapitel aus der Prasannapādā* (Krakow: Nakładem Polskiej Akademji Umiejętności, 1931).

²¹ *E.g.*, *A.* I. 16, 25; IX. 200.

²² *Ś.*, LXIV, fol. 456a.

²³ *Ś.*, pp. 118–119.

²⁴ *A.*, XIX. 360.

²⁵ *A.*, XVIII. 347–348.

²⁶ J. Masuda, ed., *Septatīkā*, *Journal of the Taiho University*, 1930, Vols. 6–7, part 2, p. 221.

²⁷ See e.g., *Ś.* LIX, fol. 343b.

²⁸ *E.g.*, *A.* VIII. 192.

²⁹ *P.*, pp. 136–137.

of a mark. The own-being, again, is lacking in the mark of being own-being."

The absence of marks is often expressed by a standard formula³⁰ which says that "*dharmas* are not conjoined nor disjoined, immaterial, invisible, non-resisting, with one mark only, i.e., no mark." The formula harks back to what in the older scriptures had been said about the self, space, and the Tathāgata. The self and the Tathāgata were called "immaterial,"³¹ and space both "immaterial and invisible."³² *Anidarśana* properly means "with no attributes,"³³ that which cannot be characterized, and, therefore, cannot be "pointed out" as something definite.³⁴ "Non-resisting" (*apratigha*) means that *dharmas* do not react or impinge on each other, do not resist and obstruct each other.

4. *Dharmas* are isolated (*vivikta*),³⁵ absolutely isolated (*atyantavivikta*). In the *Sūtras*, this term is treated as a familiar synonym of "empty," and nowhere explained. A *dharma* is called "empty" when one considers that it has no properties, "isolated" when one considers that it has no relations to other *dharmas*. As isolated, *dharmas* cannot act on each other, and, therefore, they are not made or produced.

5. *Dharmas* have never been produced, never come into existence; they are not really ever brought forth (*anabhinirvṛtti*); they are unborn (*ajāta*); they have never left the original emptiness. In order to understand why the aspect of non-production (*an-utpāda*) is so much emphasized in these *Sūtras*, one must bear in mind the tradition within which they stand. They were written for Buddhists brought up on the *Abhidharma* and *Sūtras* of the Sarvāstivādins. To contemplate the rise and fall of *dharmas* had been recommended as one of the central practices of the *Abhidharma*. It is on this kind of *Abhidharma* meditation that the *Prajñāpāramitā* now comments, saying that the experiences made, while perhaps salutary, referred to nothing but an illusion. Furthermore, the emancipation of the *arhat* was traditionally carried out by means of a *ksaya-jñāna* (cognition of extinction) followed by an *anutpāda-jñāna* (cognition of non-production). The latter term was interpreted by the Sarvāstivādins as meaning that there would be no future production of

³⁰*Na samyuktā na visamyuktā arāpino, nidarśanā apratighā ekalakṣṇāb yaduta-ślakṣṇāb*; e.g. P., pp. 164, 225, 244, 258, 261, 262; Ś. LIX, fol. 340a; LXXX, fol. 587b.

³¹*Dīgha-nikāya* I. 31, and *Majjhima-nikāya* I. 127.

³²*Majjhima-nikāya* I. 127.

³³*Dīgha-nikāya* I. 123 ff.

³⁴*Tam nidassana-abbāvato*. In A. XII. 265 it is identified with lack of marks (*ślakṣṇatva*) and with being "invisible" (*adrśya*).

³⁵E.g., A. VI. 149–150; VII. 177; VIII. 192; IX. 204–205; XII. 276; XXII. 399, 405; XXVII. 445–446.

defilements in the *arhat*. The Mahāyāna now takes up this term, and gives it a metaphysical significance to the effect that for the enlightened there is no production of any *dharmas* at all.³⁶ And even before enlightenment is reached, one of the most distinctive virtues of the Mahāyānist saint is the "patient acceptance of *dharmas* which fail to be produced."

6. Non-production is illustrated by a number of similes, which have the function "to inform about non-production."³⁷ If *dharmas* do not exist, are without own-being, have never been produced, the question may well be asked how they can appear to be so different from what they are. The answer is that, just as things in a dream, though illusory, appear to exist at the time, so all *dharmas* appear to exist although they do not. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* knows only six such similes, i.e., dreams,³⁸ magical illusions,³⁹ echoes,⁴⁰ reflected images,⁴¹ mirages,⁴² and space.⁴³ The "*Śatasāhasrikā*," in an often-repeated standard list,⁴⁴ raises the number to ten by adding the comparison with the moon reflected in water, a village of the Gandharvas, a shadow, and a magical creation (*nirmāṇa*).

B. The following *psychological attitudes* are enjoined upon us as a result of this state of affairs:

1. *Non-apprehension*. If separate *dharmas* are non-existent, cognitive activities directed toward them will be without a basis in fact. It would be a mistake, therefore, to regard such cognitive activities as a means of approaching reality. The apprehension (*upalabdhi*) of a multiplicity of separate entities actually gets us away from the true reality, from emptiness. It should, therefore, be avoided.⁴⁵ Even emptiness should not be apprehended.⁴⁶

2. The emotional concomitants of non-apprehension are summed up in the term *anabhiniveśa*, which might be rendered as "no settling down."⁴⁷ Its meaning is threefold: (a) There should be no conviction

³⁶ F. R., Haribhadra, *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, ed., U. Wogihara (Tokyo: Tokyo Bunko, 1932-1933), p. 879.

³⁷ *Anuṣṭhāna-vijñāpanātām-upādāya*, A. ix. 205.

³⁸ A., *passim*.

³⁹ A., *passim*.

⁴⁰ A. viii. 198; ix. 201, 205; xxx. 484.

⁴¹ *Pratibhāta*. A. ix. 205; xxvi. 442; xxx. 484. Cf. C. Bendall, ed., *Śikṣasamuccaya*, Bibliotheca Buddhica, I (St. Petersburg: Commissionnaires de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences, n.d.), p. 261: "As an image appears in a bright mirror, though own-being empty, so Druma, know these *dharmas*!"

⁴² A. ix. 205.

⁴³ A., *passim*.

⁴⁴ A., *passim*.

⁴⁵ For the details see E. Lamotte, *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse*, Vol. I (Louvain: Bureaux du Muséon, 1944), pp. 357-387.

⁴⁶ It is impossible here to discuss the many verbal expressions which the doctrine of non-apprehension has found in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*. One is warned against forming notions (*samjñā*), or paying attention to signs (*nimitta*). The terminology is here very technical and cannot be explained briefly.

⁴⁷ §. LXIII, fol. 563b.

that *dharmas* have reality. (b) There should be no inclination toward *dharmas*, no turning toward them (equivalent to *anābhoga*). (c) There should be no attachment to *dharmas* (equivalent to *asaṅga*). It would be futile to establish a relation with what is essentially unrelated (*vivikta*).⁴⁸

3. *No attainment (prāpti)*. No person can "have," or "possess," or "acquire," or "gain" any *dharma*. There is no person who could be there to get, reach, achieve or realize anything.⁴⁹ There is no entity that could be got.⁵⁰ Not only is attainment, or the more or less permanent combination between a *dharma* and a personal continuity, impossible as a *fact*. The selfless also have no *motive* to desire it. As Subhūti expresses it, "I do not wish for (*icchāmi*) the attainment of an unproduced *dharma*, nor for re-union (*abbisamaya*) with one."⁵¹

4. Perfect wisdom gains body in the virtue of *non-relying*, which is taught "through an almost infinite variety of expressions."⁵² It must suffice here to indicate only a few of these expressions. "*Dharmas*, because they lack in either single or manifold own-being, are unworthy of reliance."⁵³ In consequence, the mind of the Tathāgata is not supported on anything,⁵⁴ and those who wish to emulate him should "raise a thought which is not supported anywhere."⁵⁵ It is in the practice of the six perfections that one learns to lean on nothing whatever. When one practices giving, that should be done in a spirit of complete disinterestedness and inner freedom, i.e., one gives without grasping at any ideas concerning the gift, its recipient, or the reward which one may reap for oneself for one's generosity. The same "threefold purity" should be observed with the other five perfections.

5. Finally, one may say that the attitude of the perfected sage is one of *non-assertion*. His individual self is extinct, and so he will not assert himself in any way. And, since he has no belief in separate things, he will not affirm anything about any of them. Such an attitude of non-assertion must lead to logical rules which differ radically from those commonly held. We must now turn, therefore, to a discussion of the *logic of the Prajñāpāramitā*.

⁴⁸ See A. XXII. 399.

⁴⁹ This is a simple consequence of the *anatta* doctrine.

⁵⁰ This is a simple consequence of the doctrine of non-production.

⁵¹ A. I. 30 = P., p. 261.

⁵² E. Conze, *Buddhism* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1951), p. 137.

⁵³ Haribhadra, *Abhisamayalankārāloka*, ed., U. Wogihara, p. 123.

⁵⁴ *Apratishthita-mānaso bhī Tathāgato*. A. II. 37.

⁵⁵ M. Müller, ed., *Vajracchedikā* (Oxford: University Press, 1881), Chap. 10c.

C. The assumption of any kind of duality is considered as the basic error of logical thinking. "Those who course in duality cannot grow in merit. All the foolish common people are supported (*nīrita*) by duality, and their merit cannot grow. But a *bodhisattva* courses in non-duality."⁵⁶ Buddhism sees in ignorance of the facts of life the root of all evil, and the traditional formula of conditioned co-production shows how the whole world of suffering arises from ignorance as its starting point. The *Prajñāpāramitā* now claims that discrimination (*vikalpa*) is the core of ignorance and that the empirical world, with its attendant sufferings, is a thought-construction derived from false discrimination. But "the Tathāgata is one who has forsaken all discourings and discriminations."⁵⁷

If *dharmas* are non-different, they are, by that very fact, all the same (*sama*). Like the majority of Buddhist writings, the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* have, however, a marked preference for negative terms. The positive term "sameness" is used sparingly,⁵⁸ and nowhere is it further developed or explained. It is sometimes coupled with another one of the rare positive synonyms of emptiness, i.e., with "suchness."⁵⁹ When you abstract the differences between *dharmas*, you proceed to their "suchness," i.e., you take each *dharma* as it is, without adding to what is actually there, or subtracting from it.

The doctrine of non-duality can be stated from three points of view, insofar as it is applied to (1) subject and object, (2) affirmation and negation, and (3) the conditioned and the unconditioned.

(1) The duality of *subject and object* exists where there are the five senses and their objects, mind and mind-object (*dharma*), and enlightenment and the enlightened, but in absolute knowledge it is abolished.

(2) *Affirmation and negation*, existence and non-existence, are not to be held apart as two. It is the same to be as not to be. If existence and non-existence are equalized, if yes and no are identified, then the disorder of the mind is said to disappear. By this step the basic laws of logical thought are abolished. The principle of contradiction, in particular, is abrogated in emptiness. It is obvious that to say "X is empty of the own-being of X" amounts to identifying a *dharma* with its own negation. In a bold and direct manner the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* explicitly proclaim the identity of contradictory opposites, and they make no attempt to

⁵⁶ p., fol. 486.

⁵⁷ A. XIX. 358, *sarva-kalpa-vikalpa-praṇiṣo bi Tatbhāgatab.*

⁵⁸ E.g., A. IX. 206; XXIX. 476; XXXI. 526. *Vajracchedikā*, Chap. 23 and ed., T. Mutsumoto, *Suvikrān-tavikramipariprocchā* II, fol. 20a, in P. Kahle, *Studien* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1935), p. 182, *sama* is opposed to *viṣama*, "uneven," "disparate." Terms such as *eko-naya* and *eko-rasa* should also be considered in this context.

⁵⁹ *Tatbatā* or *tatbatva*.

mitigate their paradoxes. What is essential nature is no essential nature,⁶⁰ what is practice is no practice.⁶¹ In a celebrated passage,⁶² the absolute thought, which is "without modification or discrimination," and to which one should aspire, is identified with no-thought. But "that thought which is no-thought is not something which is, because one cannot find in it either a 'there is' or a 'there is not.'" The "self," which is the epitome of all that is unreal and false, deceptive and undesirable, is identified with perfect wisdom and with the Tathāgata.⁶³ Some of the considerable prestige of the *Diamond Sūtra* derives from the fact that it makes throughout a point of observing that each one of the leading concepts of Buddhist theory is equivalent to its contradictory opposite.

As in the case of other philosophical systems, it is, of course, the introduction of the Absolute which plays havoc with the rules of logic. The Absolute has on logical reasoning about the same kind of effect which a vast subterranean mass of iron would have on the magnetic needle of a compass. In its apparent illogicality the *Prajñāpāramitā* aims at working out the principles of a logic of the Absolute.

(3) Our traditional logic is adapted to a world of relatives. It must lose its bearings where one considers the relations between the relative and the Absolute, the conditioned and the unconditioned, the world of becoming and Nirvāṇa. Any relation into which the Absolute enters must *ipso facto* become an "absolute relation," a contradiction in terms, a thing not easy to recognize. There is room for surprise in this field of absolute relations. The *Prajñāpāramitā* teaches that Nirvāṇa is the same as this world of birth-and-death (*samsāra*), that "the very defilements are Nirvāṇa." The unconditioned is identified with the conditioned, the ever-changeless with the ever-changing, the pure with the defiled, the complete with the deficient. But, and this must be born in mind, the identity thus postulated is an absolute identity and does not exclude an absolute difference. As a matter of fact, an absolute difference is equivalent to an absolute identity, as follows: Nirvāṇa and I are absolutely different. I cannot get it, and it cannot get me. I can never find it, because I am no longer there when it is found. It cannot find me, because I am not there to be found. But Nirvāṇa, the everlasting, is there all the time. "Suchness is everywhere the same, since all *dharmas* have already attained

⁶⁰ A. viii. 192.

⁶¹ Ś. LIII. 279b.

⁶² Ś. iii. 495-502.

⁶³ J. Masuda, ed., *Saptasatikā*, *Journal of the Teisbo University*, 1930, Vols. 6-7, part 2, p. 221 and fol. 25b-26a.

Nirvāṇa." ⁶⁴ What keeps me apart from it, now, in me? Nothing real at all, since the self is a mere invention. So, even now, in truth, there is no real difference at all between me and Nirvāṇa. The two are identical.

RELIGIOUS MOTIVES

It must be admitted that this kind of philosophy gives little comfort to common sense. As a matter of fact, it must leave the average person in a state of gasping bewilderment. On the other hand, this method of thinking is perfectly consistent with itself, although it does not draw its inspiration from the interests and concerns of the man in the street, but from the religious aspirations of what, by contrast, one might call "the man in the forest." It now remains for me to show briefly how a concern for religious values and for a holy life has shaped the leading tenets of the ontology of the *Prajñāpāramitā*.

If selfless renunciation is the essence of the religious life, then these teachings reach the highest summit of unworldliness. If *non-attachment* is a virtue, then the negation of the multiplicity of all *dharmas* is the intellectual counterpart to the desire "to abandon all the points to which attachment could fasten itself." ⁶⁵ If our basic anxiety is only perpetuated when we rely on something and is rooted out only when we give up this search for a firm support—what could be more conducive to depriving us of any stable support than a perpetual concentration on the self-contradictory nature of all our experience? If a peaceful attitude to others is the test of religious zeal, it can only be furthered by a doctrine which tells us not to insist on anything, not to assert anything. Subhūti, the great expounder of perfect wisdom in these books, is expressly called "a dweller in peace" (*araṇā-vihārin*), one who can abide without fighting.

Where this kind of ontology is actually believed to be true, it must lead to calm and evenmindedness. There is no calm like the calm of oneness, because it is withdrawn from everything that could disturb it. The one Absolute is also known as the "*Dharma*-element" (*dharmā-dhātu*), and of it is said: "The *Dharma*-element would be upset (*vikopita*), if there were any other *Dharma* outside it. But no other *dharmā* can be apprehended outside it. If one could be apprehended, there would be an upsetting of the *Dharma*-element." ⁶⁶

⁶⁴ A. xxix. 476.

⁶⁵ A. viii. 192.

⁶⁶ P., fol. 545a.

The teaching of the sameness of everything is a somewhat roundabout way of describing the attitude, or virtue, of *evenmindedness*, which is the final crown of the Buddhist endeavor. "A *bodhisattva*, who courses in perfect wisdom, produces an even state of mind toward all beings. As a result he acquires insight into the sameness of all *dharmas*, and learns to establish beings in this insight."⁶⁷ The Sanskrit word *upekṣā*, from *upa* + *īkṣ*, means, literally, "to overlook." One overlooks what does not concern one,⁶⁸ because one is disinterested and expects nothing from the world. Far from being a mere feeling, evenmindedness results from two intellectual achievements: (1) One sees the equality of all beings and things, i.e., that they are essentially the same; and (2) One ignores the effects they have on oneself and considers the source of their doings in themselves. To be perfectly evenminded, one would also have to overlook the difference between *Nirvāṇa* and this world. This would help one to grow in fearlessness. Disgust with this world and fear of life seem to be signs of lack of courage, of low-spiritedness, which are permissible on the lower, but not on the highest, stages of the Path. Far from trying to get out of conditioned existence as soon as he can, the follower of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, armed with untrembling courage and unlimited compassion, voluntarily takes upon himself the calamities of further existence. Near *Nirvāṇa* even in this life, the saved do not isolate themselves from the world, but become its saviors.

The ontology of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is a description of the world as it appears to those whose self is extinct. That is its justification, and the source both of its strength and of its limitation.

⁶⁷ P., p. 90.

⁶⁸ The word "indifference" is better reserved for a quality of feeling tone, and Buddhists distinguish evenmindedness from an unintelligent indifference which is just stupidity and denseness, the sign of a mind closed to the world. The evenminded can open themselves much more to the world than those who strive to maintain something in themselves.