

The Five Wisdoms

Ratnaghosa

The Buddha can be experienced or perceived in different ways depending on our level of consciousness. The Buddha may be experienced as an historical human figure, subject to the same laws of time, space and conditionality as we are. This is when we operate mainly on the level of the senses. If we are able to enter into higher states of consciousness, states of meditative absorption, we will experience the Buddha more vividly as a spiritual being, resplendent with his Transcendental qualities. This is more like visionary experience. And, if we have a direct realisation of Reality, we become the Buddha and our experience is one of there being no distinction. This is a direct, unmediated experience of the Buddha. The Buddha that we perceive from the lower, sense-based level of consciousness is known as the Nirmanakaya, the 'created body' or 'body of transformation'. The Buddha that is perceived from the level of meditative absorption is known as the Sambhogakaya, the 'glorious body' or 'body of mutual delight'. And the Buddha that is experienced directly with the eye of Transcendental Wisdom is known as the Dharmakaya, the 'body of Truth'. This is the Trikaya or three bodies doctrine of Buddhism. In this talk we are particularly concerned with the Buddha as seen with the inner eye of meditative concentration. A very early example of this in the Buddhist scriptures is the case of Pingiya. Pingiya was a disciple of the Buddha who was too old and infirm to go to visit the Buddha but he told the other monks that he was never apart from the Buddha. He said, "I see him with my mind as if with my eye ... I pass the night revering him. Pingiya's level of awareness was such that he didn't need to see the Buddha in the flesh so to speak, he could see Him with his heart and mind. And ever since the death of the Buddha, meditators down the centuries have seen the Buddha with this inner eye. They have seen the 'glorious body', the Sambhogakaya. And not everyone has seen exactly the same form. The devotion and temperament and visionary capacities of different meditators have meant that a proliferation of forms of the 'glorious body' has been experienced. These come down to us through the tradition as the great assembly of archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The Mandala of the five Jinas is part of this great assembly, a very important and central part, which helps us to see the whole assembly more clearly. Each of the five Buddhas is the head of a family of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. This gives a pattern to this great proliferation of visionary forms. And this pattern is the pattern of the human psyche on its deepest level. The Mandala of the five Buddhas is a Mandala of

our mind, when our mind is free from delusion. This is the great archetypal pattern and by contemplating the five Buddhas, meditating and reflecting on them, we can come to gain a deeper knowledge of ourselves and of the workings of consciousness. Each Buddha represents or emphasises an aspect of Enlightened awareness. Each has a rich symbolism involving colour, sound, gesture, emblems and animals. Each Buddha is accompanied by a female consort, who symbolises the Wisdom or Prajna of that particular Buddha. And each has an attendant family of Bodhisattvas. This whole Mandala is a profusion of fascinating, beautiful, rich symbolism which can draw us up to a higher level of consciousness when we engage with it. A mandala has been defined by Snellgrove as: "a circle of symbolic forms ... one symbol at the centre, which represents absolute truth itself and other symbols arranged at the various points of the compass, which represent manifested aspects of this same truth". At the centre of the Mandala of the five Jinas is Vairocana, the white Buddha and arranged around him at the points of the compass are Akshobya in the East, Ratnasambhava in the South, Amitabha in the West and Amoghasiddhi in the North. The Mandala is traditionally entered from the East, which is depicted at the bottom in a two-dimensional representation. The first Buddha we encounter then is Akshobya, the Buddha of the Eastern quarter. The Wisdom of Akshobya is known as the Mirror-like Wisdom. A mirror reflects everything just as it is. Pleasant objects don't stick to the mirror nor are unpleasant objects repulsed by it. A mirror is completely objective, it reflects what is there. The Enlightened mind is like this too in that it does not respond with clinging or aversion to anything. The Enlightened mind is aware of the insubstantial, impermanent nature of all things and, therefore, responds with complete equanimity and imperturbability to everything. Akshobya's name means 'the Imperturbable'. The Enlightened mind is objective in that it relates to what is really there without adding any ideas or concepts. We tend to have so many ideas, preconceptions, assumptions and emotional biases that we rarely relate to the objective situation. We are more likely to be relating to a creation of our own deluded minds. So this Mirror-like Wisdom of Akshobya reminds us of the importance of objectivity. We need to try to be objective about ourselves, about other people and about events. Often these days we are so affected by the norms in the world about us that we have a very one sided view of ourselves, a distorted view. For instance, many people think of themselves as a problem. I was recently reading something by the American psychotherapist and mystic, Suzanne Segal, which illustrated this from her experience. She writes, "... the negative is usually taken to be the truth. After all, the negative is so compelling and seems so deep. The positive is regarded as superficial and

temporary, but, ah, the negative! When it arises, we believe we're really in the presence of truth. Connecting with others in our Western therapeutic culture is often based on a sharing of problems. When someone refuses to reveal what is most difficult in their lives, they are said to be 'withholding' or 'cut-off' or 'untrustworthy'. When their problems are known, however, they are thought to be revealing the truth about themselves. This overvaluing of the negative is rampant in our culture. Just about every person who sits across from me in my office and speaks to me about their lives believes that what is negative about them is most true. They are convinced that they carry something rotten at their core, that they are bad deep down, and that they will always return to the negative, which is the real bottom line." Objectivity sees things clearly, sees thoughts as thoughts, feelings as feelings and so on, without any need for interpretations, assumptions or labelling. Akshobya's mudra or gesture is known as the bhumisparsa mudra or earth-touching gesture. This harkens back to an incident in the symbolic account of the Buddha's life when, on the verge of Enlightenment, he is tempted and taunted by Mara. Mara represents all the forces of the psyche that resist Reality. Mara is first of all aggressive trying to arouse fear in the Buddha. When this is unsuccessful, Mara tries to tempt the Buddha into sensual pleasure. When that fails, he tries to engender doubt in the Buddha. He says, "who are you to sit here on the Vajrasana, the throne of the Enlightened ones, what right have you to sit here?" In effect he's saying, "who do you think you are?" The Buddha's response is to touch the earth and call forth the Earth Goddess, Vasundhara, as a witness that he has been a Bodhisattva for lifetimes and it is, therefore, fitting that he should be there. In the more prosaic accounts of the Buddha's Enlightenment, it simply says that he remembered all his previous lifetimes. The significance of this in terms of Akshobya is that it is another aspect of being objective. There is no boasting or false modesty, just recognition of the situation as it is. We can learn from this and, especially where we experience doubts about the benefits of Dharma practice or lack of confidence in ourselves, we can touch the earth of our own experience and endeavour to be objective about what is actually happening and what has actually happened. We can recall how we have changed, we can reflect on our abilities and qualities and put the Mara of doubt to flight with an objective appraisal of the real state of affairs. The emblem of Akshobya is the vajra and he is the head of the Vajra family of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The vajra is the diamond thunderbolt of a mind that is not bewildered by subjective biases and clouded by delusion. The vajra goes straight to the heart of things, straight to the objective truth, you could say. The Wisdom of Akshobya, the Mirror-like Wisdom is the objective, unbiased, imperturbable Wisdom and, as

we contemplate Akshobya, we can feel the longing for this Wisdom to arise in our own hearts. And, as we practice ethics and meditation inspired by Akshobya's symbolism, we can become clearer and more objective and begin to experience the calm of equanimity. Moving around the Mandala in a clockwise direction we come next to Ratnasambhava, the Buddha of the South. Ratnasambhava's Wisdom is the Wisdom of Equality or Sameness (Samatajnana). This is the Wisdom that sees the same Reality in all beings and has the same attitude to all, the same love and Compassion for all. This serves to remind us that Wisdom and Compassion are not really to be distinguished at this level. The Wisdom of Equality rains down Compassion equally on all beings, just as in the White Lotus Sutra the Dharma is seen as raining down on all equally. The Wisdom of Equality does not relate to people on the basis of any limited identity. It does not relate to people on the basis of nationality, ethnic background, skin colour, sexual preference, gender, size, shape, looks, likes or dislikes. The Wisdom of Equality relates on the basis of common humanity and even more primarily, on the basis of the common Reality of all – the common impermanence and insubstantiality and the common potential for spiritual Insight. The Mudra or gesture of Ratnasambhava is the varada or giving mudra of the open hand. Ratnasambhava gives unstintingly because the Enlightened mind is abundant and rich, overflowing with a wealth of creativity. The emblem is a jewel, symbol of richness. Ratnasambhava symbolises the Three Jewels which are an inexhaustible treasure of spiritual riches. Ratnasambhava is associated with the human realm and with the transformation of pride into the Wisdom of Sameness. Pride or making comparisons is the big failing of the human realm and the Wisdom which sees the common Reality and common humanity of all overcomes this tendency. Also, the activity of giving replaces the tendency to make comparisons with a more genuine awareness of others and their needs. Ratnasambhava is yellow in colour. This is a very bright, alive colour that expresses something of the exuberance and energy that is released by the Wisdom of Equality. Ratnasambhava sees the whole universe as one great dance of joy that we are invited to join. All we have to lose is our limitations, our fears and our egotistic madness. We are invited to be expansive, outgoing, giving, joyful, alive, and vibrant with no holding back. If we come under the influence of Ratnasambhava we will be encouraged to let go of all tightness, whether mentally, emotionally, verbally or even financially and we will be urged to give and give and give. When the Wisdom of Equality starts to have an effect on us, we are moved away from any tendency to have a poverty mentality and we begin to experience the wealth mentality, which has no fears and is able to give, without even having any sense of giving. Giving becomes so

natural, so ordinary, that it is no more thought of as something special than breathing or eating. According to Vessantara, the Wisdom of Sameness "is a strong, positive identification with all life". From this perspective, to live is to give. Moving on around the Mandala, we come to Amitabha, the Buddha of the West. Amitabha's Wisdom is the All-Distinguishing Wisdom. This Wisdom means that the Enlightened mind sees the uniqueness of things, sees the differences. This balances the Wisdom of Sameness. The Enlightened mind is aware of the sameness and differences of beings simultaneously. To refer again to the parable of the rain cloud from the White Lotus Sutra, the rain of the Dharma falls equally on all beings, but all grow according to their own nature. Temperament or personality changes but is unique at the same time. Even Enlightened ones retain their personality differences. A well known example in the Pali Canon is the good friends Sariputra and Maudgalyayana. You are all no doubt familiar with the story of the yaksha who hit Sariputra over the head while he was meditating. Maudgalyayana was looking on and couldn't believe that Sariputra could just carry on meditating after such a blow. Later he asked Sariputra if he felt anything and Sariputra complained of a slight headache. He, in his turn, was astonished that Maudgalyayana could actually see a yaksha. He couldn't even see a mud-sprite himself. So, these two Awakened ones were very different, each unique in his qualities and abilities. In the chapter two we looked at the three types of individual, the faith-follower, the dharma-follower and the Body Witness and this classification also gives us an intimation of how individuals develop according to their own unique temperament. Another example of very different Enlightened masters from the Tibetan tradition are Milarepa, who could be said to be a faith follower, and Tsong Khupa, who was more like a Dharma follower. So, this All-Distinguishing Wisdom reminds us of our uniqueness and the uniqueness of all beings. We could say that to have a real appreciation of our uniqueness is self-metta. This is different from feeling special in an egotistic way, which is probably just an over-compensation for a sense of hollowness or inferiority. A real appreciation of our uniqueness is more objective, like the earth-touching of Akshobya. Many people feel unloved or unlovable and this can lead to a sort of insatiable craving out of desperation to find some security and satisfaction. This is the state of the beings in the realm of hungry ghosts (pretas). These are depicted in the Wheel of Life as having large bellies and small mouths so that they are never fully nourished, never satisfied. Amitabha is associated with this realm. The Compassion of Amitabha, which is conjoined with the All-Distinguishing Wisdom, loves all beings for themselves, for their uniqueness. This can serve to help them appreciate their uniqueness more and so get a sense of being lovable and loved. Amitabha is red,

which is the colour of love and compassion. His mudra is the Dhyana or meditation mudra. Meditation helps us to become more and more aware so that we can see ourselves and others more clearly, so that we can begin to grasp our uniqueness and the uniqueness of others and simultaneously see the common Reality and potential for Insight that is the common human heritage. When we come under the influence of Amitabha, our hearts open in love and compassion and we affectionately appreciate the details and subtleties of difference that are everywhere in life and especially in all the individuals we meet. Moving on now, we come to Amoghasiddhi, the Buddha of the North. His name means "unobstructed success" and his Wisdom is the All-Performing Wisdom. This is the aspect of the Enlightened mind which acts spontaneously for the benefit of all beings. Every means are used to help beings to progress spiritually. The All-Performing Wisdom represents a fearless outpouring of Compassionate activity, whenever and wherever a need is seen. It is a total and immediate response to the present situation with all the tremendous energy at the disposal of a fully integrated and Awake mind. Amoghasiddhi's emblem is the double vajra representing the union of all opposites and total psychic integration. His gesture is the Abhaya mudra, the gesture of fearlessness. The spiritual life demands courage, there are many obstacles to face and we are bound to encounter disappointment, doubt and discomfort. We can't afford to allow ourselves to be weak and frightened. We have to develop fearlessness, the ability to take risks. One way to do this is to be honest about our weaknesses and resolve to work on them. If we only develop our strengths we will be one sided and we will be fearful about betraying our weaknesses. We cannot always see ourselves clearly, we may see our strengths as weaknesses and our weaknesses as strengths. That's why we need other people, especially those a little more experienced on the Path, to point out to us what we should be working on. The initial step on the path of fearlessness could be to invite criticism from our good friends and resolve to work to develop our total being, we become integrated and strong. We become confident and courageous. We are then able to mobilise our energy and act for the benefit of others. We become successful at communicating the Dharma to others and because of our strength of character and fearlessness, they sit up and take notice. Amoghasiddhi is concerned with the realm of the Titans, the realm of fierce competitiveness, filled with powerful, aggressive beings. But the All-Performing Wisdom is more powerful still. It cannot be defeated and even the Titans have to take notice, however grudgingly. When we contemplate the mysterious dark green figure of Amoghasiddhi, with his double vajra and powerful gesture of fearlessness, we can be inspired to take courage and face our fears. Fear is debilitating and a

real hindrance to spiritual progress. And, as far as I know from my own experience, the only way to overcome fear is to face it. When we come out on the other side of fear we will experience a great release of energy and the joy of relief and freedom. This is what the figure of the Dakini, the naked female sky-dancer of Tantric Buddhism, represents. The energy released when we overcome fear is more energy for the practice and communication of the Dharma and it is another step on the way to the unobstructed success of the All-Performing Wisdom. The All-Performing Wisdom of Amoghasiddhi, with its emphasis on activity for the benefit of all, tells us yet again that Wisdom is Compassion, Compassion is Wisdom. Now we come to the Centre of the Mandala and the figure of Vairocana. Vairocana's Wisdom is called the Dhamadhatu Wisdom. It is the Wisdom of the sphere or realm of Reality. This is the ultimate Wisdom of which all others are aspects. This is the Enlightened mind in its full blaze of glory, like the sun. Vairocana means 'illuminator', the one who lights up or illuminates everything. In Japan, Vairocana is known as the Sun Buddha, he is the spiritual sun or illuminator of the universe. The Enlightened mind experiences the universe as fully pervaded by Reality. There is a direct experience of Reality and the cosmos being the same. The cosmos is Reality, Reality is the cosmos. Vairocana's mudra is the Dharmachakra pravartana mudra, the mudra of the turning of the wheel of the Dharma, or the teaching mudra. Buddhism began when the Buddha successfully communicated his experience of Enlightenment to others. This is known as the turning of the Wheel of the Dharma. The Wheel of the Dharma was set in motion and has been rolling on ever since. This mudra represents something that is central to the Dharma – it can be communicated. But more than that, it must be communicated. Inherent in the experience of Awakening is the urge to communicate the Truth to others. Compassion is the activity of the Enlightened mind. The animals associated with Vairocana are lions and these also symbolise the proclaiming of the Truth. The Buddha's teaching is often referred to as the Singhanada, the lion's roar. So the Wisdom of Vairocana, the Dhamadhatu Wisdom, reminds us that everything is teaching the Dharma, Reality is all around us and within us. The sound of the Dharma is everywhere. The Truth is in everything. It also reminds us that communication or sharing is innate to the experience of Insight. From this we can gather that sharing what we have learned or understood is something we can practice from early on in our spiritual journey. In our initial enthusiasm about the Dharma we may want to tell everyone the good news whether they want to hear it or not. This is not really appropriate. But it is appropriate to share our understanding with those who genuinely are interested and point them in the direction of those with greater understanding. I say those who are genuinely

interested because there are also those who are only interested in a very superficial way, who may want to undermine your idealism with cynicism. We need to be willing to share and communicate what we have learnt but, at the same time, we need to be intelligent about when, where and to whom we communicate such a precious gift. This sharing or communication is what Vairocana is inspiring us to do. As Vessantara puts it, "The gift Vairocana gives us is the responsibility of sharing what we have learnt with others. The final message of the Mandala is that no experience has been complete until it has been communicated". (Meeting the Buddhas, p 126) We have come to the end of the Mandala of the five Jinas and looked at the five Wisdoms. We have learnt that each Buddha and each wisdom has many messages for us and, in particular, we have highlighted the practices of objectivity, generosity, appreciating uniqueness, facing fear and sharing our experience. The more objective we can be, the more we will experience equanimity, as we are not pulled this way and that by our subjective reaction. Generosity helps us to transcend self-centredness and, in particular, is an antidote to pride or the tendency to make comparisons with others. Appreciating our uniqueness and the uniqueness of others gives rise to Metta and helps to counteract any feelings of being unlovable or unloved and the neurotic cravings those feelings give rise to. Facing our fears frees up our energy so that we can act for the benefit of ourselves and others. And sharing our experience of the Dharma makes us more conscious of that experience and can be an inspiration to others. There is much more to the Mandala of the five Buddhas than I have mentioned here, it is an inexhaustible treasure of Dharma teaching and is worth re-visiting again and again. There is one more aspect I would like to mention. Each of the five Buddhas has a female consort. This is a Buddha in female form, although when we speak of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas we musn't take gender too literally, it is just one more skilful means used by the Enlightened Ones to try to pierce through the clouds of our ignorance. The female Buddhas are Locana, consort of Akshobya, Mamaki, consort of Ratnasambhava, Pandaravasini, consort of Amitabha, Tara, consort of Amoghasiddhi, and Akashadhateshvari, consort of Vairocana. These male and female figures are depicted in sexual union. Strangely for us perhaps this has nothing to do with sex, there is no erotic content to these images. This is sexual symbolism. In the Tantra this is profound and sacred symbolism, expressing the highest Truth. These images, known as Yab-Yum, are symbolic of the unity or oneness of Wisdom and Compassion. The female Buddha represents the Wisdom aspect and the male Buddha represents the Compassion aspect, which is the active aspect of Enlightenment. The sexual embrace symbolises the fact that there is no distinction between Wisdom and Compassion, they are just two

ways of speaking about, or two ways of seeing, what is in fact a total experience. So, the final message of the five Wisdoms is that Wisdom is Compassion.