

## **Finding the Place Where Our Perfect Wisdom is Hidden**

*Theme: Each of us already has a hidden Buddha Nature*

This is what we have been told. At one time the Buddha was staying near Rajagriha, in a great pavilion built of sweet-smelling sandalwood, surrounded by many thousands of holy men and women. And on this occasion the Buddha created, as a teaching for his followers, a miraculous vision. In this vision the sky was filled with great lotus flowers, each with a thousand petals. After a short time the petals of the beautiful flowers suddenly wilted and withered away, giving off a nasty smell, as dead flowers do. But what everyone then saw, to their amazement, was that within each flower there was, now that the petals had withered away, a beautiful golden image of a Buddha meditating and radiating beams of light.

Now, one of the assembled company, being confused as to what this vision might mean, and knowing that everyone else was equally confused, asked the Buddha to explain what it meant. And the Buddha did so, as follows. And to make sure that everyone understood him, he gave no fewer than nine different explanations.

**1)** 'My friends,' said the Buddha, 'What this vision shows is what was revealed to me at the moment when I became Enlightened, and could see the truth about the whole of reality. What I saw at that time, and what I still see, is that all people are like the lotus flowers in this vision. Inside all their many petals, everyone contains within them a Buddha image. When people understand my teachings, they will leave behind their greed, their anger and their mistaken ideas as to what is true or important. As with the lotuses in the vision, these petals will wither and drop off, leaving behind, at the centre of the flower, the Buddha's wisdom.'

**2)** 'Or perhaps, my friends, you can understand it like this. Imagine that you know that in a nearby cave or tree there is a delicious store of honey, but it is surrounded by a swarm of angry bees, so that although you know the honey is there you can't get to enjoy it. And then along comes an expert bee-keeper, who carefully takes away the bees and at last you can enjoy the honey. The Buddha is like such a bee-keeper, who skilfully helps everyone to remove all their buzzing, stinging anger and greed and unhelpful ideas, so that they can enjoy at last the pure honey of perfect wisdom.'

**3)** 'Or perhaps, my friends, you can understand it like this. Suppose you are hungry and find some wheat on the ground. When you pick it up, all you can see is the hard shells or husks. And so, not realising that inside the husks are delicious kernels that

would be excellent food, you might throw the wheat away, thinking it is useless, and continue to go hungry. But the Buddha would teach you how to clean away the husks – the anger and greed – and reveal the delicious wisdom that is inside, just the food that you have been looking for.

**4)** 'Or perhaps, my friends, you can understand it like this. Imagine some poor villagers living near a great pile of smelly mud and rubbish, and, although they don't know it, deep down inside all the rubbish there is a beautiful brooch made of the purest gold. The Buddha helps them to understand that there is indeed a beautiful gold brooch buried under this pile of rubbish near their houses, and that, being made of the finest gold it is not in any way spoiled by all the mud and rubbish on top of it. The Buddha's teaching shows them how to dig up the beautiful gold brooch, so that they can sell it, and instead of being poor the whole village now has everything they could ever need. This golden brooch is the Buddha's wisdom, which has been lying there just nearby, but until then they did not know it was there and had spent their lives in anger and sorrow at being surrounded by smelly mud and rubbish.

**5)** 'Or perhaps, my friends, you can understand it like this. Suppose that there is a great store of treasure buried underneath your very own house. The treasure can't tell you it is there, but the Buddha can always see that store of treasure, that perfect wisdom, lying there within you. His teachings can help you understand the wisdom you already possess within you, and so bring an end to your sufferings.

**6)** 'Or perhaps, my friends, you can understand it like this. If you bury the seed of a mango fruit in the ground it does not decay and rot, but instead grows into a tall and beautiful mango tree. In the same way, the Buddha can see that within each of us is the seed of understanding that can never be destroyed and can always grow into the great tree of perfect wisdom.

**7)** 'Or perhaps, my friends, you can understand it like this. Suppose that someone possessed a golden statue of the Buddha and needed to transport it to a distant country. To prevent it being stolen during the journey, he wraps it in dirty old rags. But during his long journey he suddenly dies, the golden statue wrapped in old rags is left abandoned, nobody knows it is there, and other travellers trample it into the ground. But the Buddha can see the buried golden statue, even though it is trampled into the ground in the middle of a field far from any village or town. He tells people about it the golden statue buried far from anywhere and they dig it up, joyfully, and make it into a Buddha shrine. In the same way, as we all make our

difficult journeys, bowed down with worries, each of us secretly carries an image of the Buddha within us. No matter what happens to us, this image of the Buddha is never destroyed. And somewhere on our journey we may suddenly realise that we actually do have the Buddha within us, and there and then – in the middle of a field far away – gain perfect wisdom and tranquillity, like the Buddha himself.

**8)** 'Or perhaps, my friends, you can understand it like this. Imagine that a woman who was very poor and badly treated by her family and neighbours should give birth to a son or a daughter. The woman felt sorry for her child, thinking that, like her, it must grow up to be unhappy and badly treated because everyone would expect bad things of a child whose mother was so poor and disliked. But the Buddha knew that, like everyone else, the poor woman's child contained the qualities of a Buddha within it, and should therefore never think of itself as less capable than others. On the contrary, that poor woman's son or daughter was just as able, as anyone else, with the right sort of effort, to develop perfect wisdom and the power to do good in the world.

**9)** 'Or perhaps, my friends, you can understand it like this. In a factory, statues of the Buddha are made by pouring liquid gold into moulds made of clay. In order to melt the gold into a liquid it has to be made so hot that the clay moulds become blackened and burnt. But when they have cooled down, the burnt, dirty moulds are broken and inside them the golden statues are revealed in all their beauty. In the same way, if we can break away our nasty feelings of greed and hatred we will find that underneath them, within us, we each have the hidden, perfect qualities of a Buddha, like pure shining gold.'

After finishing his explanations, the Buddha said to all the assembled holy men and women, 'If you can learn to really understand this teaching, you will have understood one of the most important things that I saw when I became Enlightened, and you will see the way to perfect wisdom.

### Questions

1. This story is about where we might need to look for perfect wisdom. Give in your own words one of the Buddha's examples.
2. Do you see any similarities between the different examples?
3. What do these examples tell us about where we will find our own perfect wisdom?
4. Do you think that these examples encourage us to feel hopeful about our spiritual progress?

*Dharma Issue:*

- *The doctrine that for each of us a 'Buddha Self' ('Buddha Nature') is hidden near-at-hand.*

*Based on the 'Tathagatagarba Sutta', (third century CE) reprinted in Lopez (Ed) Buddhism in Practice, University of Princeton Press, 1995, pp. 92-106*