

*Part Four*

THE RATNAGUNA-SAMCAYAGATHA



*Introduction*

## THE GREATER MANDALA

**IN THE DIAMOND SUTRA PERFECT WISDOM IS POWERFUL, THRUSTING, AND EFFECTIVE.**

**DON'T IMAGINE, HOWEVER, THAT YOU'RE GOING TO GET A GREAT POWERFUL BLAST**

**FROM THE RATNAGUNA-SAMCAYAGĀTHĀ.**

**HERE, PERFECT WISDOM IS GOING TO COME VERY SOFTLY, VERY GENTLY,**

**VERY UNOBTRUSIVELY**

The *Ratnagūṇa-samcayagāthā* is quite unlike the *Vajracchedikā*. It comes at the Perfection of Wisdom, we might say, from an entirely different direction. This is reflected in the title itself: we are contemplating not the 'Perfection of Wisdom that cuts like a diamond', but the 'verses on the accumulation of the precious qualities of the Perfection of Wisdom'. It is, of course, the same Perfection of Wisdom, but there is a markedly different emphasis. Before we look at the text, therefore, we need to take another look at our fundamental assumptions about the subject-matter of the *Ratnagūṇa-samcayagāthā*. Otherwise we are likely to be hampered by a subtle but critical misunderstanding right from the start.

Like the *Diamond Sūtra*, the *Ratnagūṇa-samcayagāthā* is concerned with one single subject. Indeed, this one subject provides the field of enquiry for the whole of the Perfection of Wisdom. The subject is the career of the Bodhisattva. What is a Bodhisattva? How does a Bodhisattva behave, practise, live? What does a Bodhisattva do? Now if we are not careful, we can pick up a false impression of the nature of the Bodhisattva from the laborious detail in which the texts answer these questions. If from their deliberations we start to form an impression of the Bodhisattva as a

highly intellectual being, and of the Perfection of Wisdom as a highly intellectual teaching, then—to be blunt—we have got the wrong end of the stick.

The verses we are going to encounter may seem abstruse, but they are not *intellectually* abstruse—or at least, much less so than many other Perfection of Wisdom texts. The *Ratnaguna-samcayagāthā* is quite simple and intelligible in comparison with, for example, the *Diamond Sūtra*. If we still find it a little daunting, it may well be because in it we run up against the medieval Indian mode of communication, which, being excessively abstract and conceptual, is not very well suited to the spiritual genius of Buddhism. In particular, such a relentlessly conceptual approach is ill-suited for the task which the Perfection of Wisdom texts set out to achieve, the task of demolishing the whole conceptual framework they rest upon. Concepts are dismissed by means of other concepts—comparatively gross ones giving way to comparatively subtle ones.

Most Westerners—and certainly most English people—simply do not feel at home with this sort of thing. It may be a relief, therefore, to realize that this is not a standard approach which has to be followed by all Buddhists. We need to distinguish between the Indian mind at work and Buddhism itself, and develop a form of expression more natural to us. It may be difficult to see where we are going to find a more real and immediate form of expression into which this conceptual language might be translated, but we do have a precedent. In its progress from India to China, Buddhism did change its manner of expressing itself completely. Ch’an Buddhists took teachings like this and entirely recast them, so that instead of lengthy, abstract disquisitions you got a shout, or a slap, or someone holding up a flower. The same thing was meant, but the medium of communication was totally different. As translated into Chinese, the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature itself has a different, more concrete feel to it, as the Chinese title—‘The Dark Wisdom’—indicates.

We could start to develop our own version of the teachings, as the Chinese did, by pruning some of the metaphysical exuberance of the Mahāyāna. Alternatively, we could perhaps go back and explore archaic Buddhist teachings like the *Udāna* and the *Sutta-nipāta*, which date from a time long before the Abhidharmists and the Mahayanists began their conceptual analysis, if we want a more down to earth approach. But we need not abandon the Perfection of Wisdom texts for fear of taking them the wrong way. Even while we grapple with the medieval Indian mind,

there are still various basic and straightforward means we can use to derive great benefit from the teachings.

The first and most important thing is to recognize that the medium is not the message.<sup>43</sup> Otherwise, we should have no hope at all of getting in touch with Perfect Wisdom by reading books about it, or even by reading the scriptures. In fact, the message and the medium are so far from being the same thing that they actually undermine one another. The Perfection of Wisdom may speak a language which intellectuals understand, but its message actually has nothing to do with anything intellectual. If we pay more attention to the medium than the message we will get the idea that these teachings are an encouragement to think, but they are not. Rather, they use thought to undo thought. Of course, this very idea can cause us all sorts of problems, especially if we get caught up in thinking about how to think our way out of thought—as we are likely to do if we succumb to the baleful influence of the ever-burgeoning *literature* of Zen.

Having recognized that the medium is not the message, however, how can we free our minds from this tendency to convoluted thinking? One method is the practice of silence. When we stop voicing our thoughts, our thinking becomes less busy and more illuminating. At the same time we are coming more directly into contact with things, and even—perhaps surprisingly—with other people. A silence does not signal a break in communication; if anything, there is even more communication, at a more subtle level. We find more subliminal, and in that respect more expressive, modes coming to the fore, involving the eyes, the face, gestures, and posture. We may even find that we can communicate our awareness of someone without looking at them.

Another method which helps to lift the veil of discursive thought is chanting a mantra. This works by giving you something to think *of*, but not something to think *about*, because a mantra doesn't have a meaning in the ordinary sense. You may give it a meaning, but that will be quite secondary. Primarily it is a sound—a sound symbol. It is very important to be wholehearted about mantra-chanting, to make a conscious decision at the beginning of the practice that all your energy is going to go into that practice. If you don't gather yourself together at the start, you just sort of drift into it, and trains of thought tend to develop while the mantra is carrying on in another part of your mind.

Any serious student of the Perfection of Wisdom will, of course, practise meditation. It might seem that the obvious practice to concentrate on would be one that specifically developed awareness or mindfulness—the *ānāpāna-sati*, the 'mindfulness of breathing', perhaps—and this would

not be a bad idea by any means. Very often, however, the word 'awareness' is used in a way that suggests some kind of dissociation from feeling, but this is what I would call 'alienated awareness', a cold, separated awareness, very different from the real, integrated awareness of the Bodhisattva. So if you want to develop Perfect Wisdom, an equally important practice is, perhaps surprisingly, the *mettā bhāvanā*, the cultivation of universal loving-kindness.

Why this should be so becomes clear when we take a fresh look at the word 'wisdom'. This is our workaday rendering of the Sanskrit term *prajñā*, but Herbert Guenther translates *prajñā* more precisely. According to Dr Guenther, wisdom consists in 'analytical appreciative understanding'. As we have seen, the reduction of all *dharma*s to *sūnyatā* is the analytical understanding that is an essential ingredient of *prajñā*—but it has to be united with quite another mode of understanding, described by Guenther as 'appreciative'.

**THE BODHISATTVA, QUITE UNPURPOSEFULLY,  
REARRANGES THE WHOLE UNIVERSE AND TURNS IT INTO A GIGANTIC MANDALA**

The appreciative aspect of *prajñā* opens up a perspective on the whole subject-matter of the *Ratnagūṇa-samcayagāthā*—and of the *Prajñāpāramitā* generally—that is all too easily overlooked. It represents such a significant dimension of the activity of the Bodhisattva, and offers such a useful counterbalance to the intellectuality with which we tend to approach *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, even such lucid ones as the *Ratnagūṇa-samcayagāthā*, that it is worth exploring some of its implications. Let us remind ourselves, therefore, of what the experience of a Bodhisattva (to whom the *Prajñāpāramitā* is specifically addressed) is really like.

The Enlightenment of the Buddha was not a cold, detached knowledge. He saw with warmth; he saw with feeling; what is more, he saw everything as being pure, or *subha*, which also means beautiful. The Buddha saw everything as pure beauty because he saw everything with compassion—just as, conversely, when you hate someone, they appear ugly. When, out of *mettā*, you see things as beautiful, you naturally experience joy and delight. And out of that joy and delight flow spontaneity, freedom, creativity, and energy. This flow from *mettā* to joy to freedom and energy is the constant experience of the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva's wisdom in the fullest sense therefore includes *mettā*. In a sense, we could even say that *mettā* is *prajñā*.

We may further dispel any impression a superficial look at the *Prajñā-pāramitā* may give that the Bodhisattva is a sort of glorified logic-chopper by looking at another word used to describe the Bodhisattva's experience: *vidyā*. *Vidyā* is the opposite of *avidyā*, 'ignorance', and is usually translated as 'knowledge'. However, Guenther renders it as 'aesthetic appreciation' (like *prajñā* but without the element of analysis), which comes much closer to its true meaning. *Vidyā* is a sort of relishing of things, a harmony with the world; and its opposite, *avidyā*, conveys a sense of alienation and conflict—certainly not an absence of *knowledge* in the usual sense of the word.

When one is said to *know* something, this carries the suggestion that the knowledge is utilitarian. One knows what the thing is good for; one knows what one can do with it. Sometimes this attitude to things can strike you quite forcibly. One evening, when I was living in Kalimpong, I was out for a walk and saw an enormously tall, beautiful pine tree growing at the side of the road. As I stood admiring it, a Nepali friend came along. 'Just look at this tree!' I exclaimed. 'Isn't it magnificent?' 'Oh yes', he replied, 'There must be at least twenty *maunds* of firewood there—enough for the whole winter!'

If what we see is the utilitarian value of something, we are relating to it from a need, which becomes desire, which turns to craving for the object conceived as fulfilling that desire. The tree is seen not as existing in its own right, for its own sake, but as something to fulfil our need. If, however, we have no desires to be fulfilled, there is no subject and no object. That is the state of the Bodhisattva—empty of any desire to use things for any particular purpose. All that is left is aesthetic appreciation. If you are a Bodhisattva you enjoy the world much as you enjoy a work of art or an artistic performance—with the difference that you do not experience a division between yourself and something 'out there'. Normally—though less so in the cinema—people in an audience retain a sense of themselves as subjects separate from what they are experiencing as an aesthetic object, and to that degree remain alienated from it. But the Bodhisattva's experience of the world is more like

*Music heard so deeply  
That it is not heard at all,  
But you are the music  
While the music lasts.*<sup>44</sup>

and unlike the experience of the woman in the stalls who forgets it is 'only' a play and shouts to Othello that Desdemona is innocent.

The 'purpose' of a Bodhisattva, if one may speak in that way at all, is in no degree passive, however. It is not unlike the function of the artist—except that a painter, say, can rarely just enjoy the world without starting to think of how to make a picture out of it. What the Bodhisattva creates is something different. The Bodhisattva, quite unpurposefully, rearranges the whole universe and turns it into a gigantic mandala.

What does this mean? Well, what is a mandala? Putting aside the more conventional descriptions, let us take this short definition by a Tibetan teacher, Rongzompa Chokyi Zangpo: 'To make a mandala is to take any prominent aspect of reality and surround it with beauty.' Why you should select one particular aspect of reality over another will be a matter not of attraction as a form of craving, but of spiritual affinity. It will be a facet of reality that you value and appreciate enough to want to surround it with a harmonious pattern of beautiful images. You take, say, a particular Buddha figure—one that you find particularly appealing, sublime, or precious—as the aspect of reality you want to focus on, and you decorate it with, for instance, other Buddha figures at the points of the compass. Then you might place the four elements in between, and use all the other things in nature as materials with which to fill the spaces so as to make a harmonious and pleasing configuration.

The Bodhisattva creates a mandala through a response to the world that is aesthetic and appreciative rather than utilitarian. To sustain life you have to engage in a certain amount of practical activity—you have to think about things and understand how the world works—but if you are a Bodhisattva all this takes place within an overall context of aesthetic appreciation. We usually think of 'aesthetic appreciation' as a little separate part of life within a much larger area that is utilitarian and 'practical', but really it needs to be the other way around. Our overall attitude, our overall response to life, should be purely aesthetic. We should not seek to use things, but just enjoy them, appreciate them, feel for them. We don't have to think of our mandala of aesthetic appreciation as something the size of one of those Tibetan *thangkas* sitting in a corner of the great big real world of important practical business. Instead, we can think of ourselves as living *within* a 'greater mandala' of aesthetic appreciation, of which all our practical mundane affairs, and the fulfilment of all our (non-neurotic) needs and wants, occupy just a tiny corner. The real values are aesthetic, not utilitarian.

There is a story of a Taoist sage who was sitting by a river with a fishing rod when someone came along and asked him how he could reconcile trying to catch fish with being a Taoist sage. He replied 'It's all right, I'm



not using any bait.' He was just enjoying the fishing; he didn't need to try and catch anything. We don't *really* have anything to do—well, do we? Most of the time we could just be sitting back, as it were, and enjoying the universe. That's our major occupation. That's our real work—not to work. We need to get food to eat, clothing, a roof over our head, healthcare, a few books, transport of some kind ... but the rest of our time and energy we can just devote to the contemplation of the universe, simply enjoying it all. This is how a Bodhisattva lives, anyway.

I am not talking about some lotus-eating, day-dreaming, navel-gazing ideal here. The Bodhisattva is the greatest worker of all, constantly responding to the objective needs of a situation, but at the same time he or she operates within the greater mandala of aesthetic appreciation. It is not even as though the sphere within which the Bodhisattva operates is a sphere of 'practical activity' that exists apart from the greater mandala. Bodhisattvas do not absent themselves from the mandala of aesthetic appreciation when they carry on their practical activities. The greater mandala interpenetrates that limited sphere, so that those practical activities are an expression of the values of the greater mandala within a certain context and for the sake of certain people.

The Bodhisattva essentially courses between—and transcends—two unsatisfactory extremes. On the one hand, we can be so immersed in practical activities that we identify with them and consequently become rather harassed and worried, losing sight of the wider horizons of aesthetic appreciation. On the other hand, we can lose ourselves in a spaced-out—if vaguely positive—state of mind in which we are unable to get anything done. The ideal is the middle way. We need to carry on the cycle of practical activities—to which we are *not* attached, which does *not* harass us, about which we *don't* worry—within the much wider circle of the greater mandala. Then we can enjoy our work, because it is interpenetrated by this appreciative awareness. This kind of balance is not at all easy to achieve. All the time we are likely to be tending towards one or the other of these two extremes, so that we will need to make constant adjustments to keep to a middle way.

One antidote to the first extreme is to get into the country for a while, and allow the influence of nature to remind us of the higher reality of the greater mandala. But as well as taking breaks from the city—to go on retreat, for example—we also need to restore the balance a bit every day. This means making sure that the time we spend with friends is not devoted exclusively to practical matters. It also means using our

meditation time creatively, not just to sort out the problems and difficulties of daily life.

The antidote to the second extreme is quite simply to plunge into some demanding project. The ideal situation is to live and work with other people, so that you are all working for the sake of a shared spiritual objective, and everything you do is—directly or indirectly—towards that end. You can get a lot of hard and even tough work done if you have an overall atmosphere which is relaxed, peaceful, and light-hearted (which may mean living and working with people of the same sex). Of course you inevitably lose perspective sooner or later, so that the atmosphere starts to get a bit tense or even fraught. That is when at least some of those involved need to go away for a while and get a view of the whole picture again. You do need to be rather careful when you get back from some time away; the refined energy level that you bring back from retreat is likely to be in danger of being dissipated as it comes into contact with coarser, more tense energies. You get irritated; those who have not been away get resentful. If it is feasible, the best thing is perhaps for half the people living or working together to go on retreat at a time.

As a general rule, we need to alternate between life in the country, where it is easier to establish contact with the greater mandala, and life in the city, where that attitude of appreciation can readily engage with a situation in which we are giving of ourselves. Both of these are absolutely necessary for the vast majority of people. Our activity requires the serenity of meditation, while our meditation needs to be vibrant and dynamic, not just a pleasant little relaxation session. If we get the balance right, we go on retreat with our energies aroused and return to the city with the perspective of the greater mandala to apply to whatever we do. The aim—which may take a long time to achieve—is to bring an attitude of pure aesthetic appreciation to whatever circumstances come our way.

**YOU DON'T HAVE TO JUSTIFY YOUR EXISTENCE BY BEING USEFUL.**

**YOU YOURSELF ARE THE JUSTIFICATION FOR YOUR EXISTENCE**

When I lived in Kalimpong I got to know a French Buddhist nun who was quite a scholar—she had been at the Sorbonne and was in fact a very high-powered lady, intellectually speaking. She had a terrible temper, she was very demanding and exacting, and she was always busy. Whenever I went to see her she would be washing and scrubbing, feeding her dogs and cats, cooking and studying (at the same time), writing letters, rushing off to see this person or that, meeting lamas, going to the bazaar,

coming back from the bazaar, building things, knocking them down, chopping them up ... she never stopped. One day she came to see me and said 'Bhante, I just can't seem to meditate.' I said 'Anīla (this is the polite way of addressing a nun), you're very good in many ways, but there's just one thing you've got to learn; then you'll be able to meditate.' 'What is it? What is it?' she asked excitedly, getting ready to rush out and do it. I said, 'You must learn to waste time.' At this she nearly jumped out of her robe. 'Waste time!' she shrieked. 'With so many things to be done, you're asking me to waste time? Is that your Buddhism?' 'Yes', I said, 'so far as you are concerned that is my Buddhism. Just learn to waste time. You'll get on much better.' Unfortunately she never did learn to waste time. It is just as difficult for someone like her to change as it is for people who need no encouragement whatsoever to waste time, but who on the contrary need to bring a little more focus into their lives.

The Bodhisattva does useful things, but he or she enjoys them. This is why it is said that the Bodhisattva *plays*. The idea of *līlā*, the 'play' or the 'game', plays quite a prominent role in modern Indian spiritual life. The spiritual life itself is thought of as a *līlā*, a purely spontaneous welling-up of spiritual energy that is, in a way, purposeless. In Tantric Buddhism this is termed the *sahaja* state—the state which is completely natural, innate, and spontaneous. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, however, it is called the *anubhogacarya*, the 'spontaneous life' of the Bodhisattva, which represents the culmination of the whole *carya* series. The first of these is the pre-Buddhistic *brahmacarya*, or 'Brahma-faring', taken up by early Buddhism; then *dharmacarya* is the Buddhistic, especially 'Hinayanist' term. *Sambhodhicarya* is the general Mahayanist term, and *anubhogacarya* comes from the later Mahāyāna. The idea of *anubhogacarya* is even enshrined in the title of a rather late, legendary, and embellished life of the Buddha, the *Lalita-vistara*, or 'Extended Account of the Sports of the Buddha'. His life is described here in terms of 'sports' because, according to the Mahāyāna, his actions were spontaneous, free, and natural, just like the play of a child.

The difference between work and play is that play is not necessary. It is not harnessed to any goal; it serves no purpose. In Sanskrit the fine arts are called *lalitakala*, the 'playful arts', because they're of no earthly use. You can live without the arts: no one ever dropped dead from lack of art. It is quite superfluous—which is why it's so necessary. Likewise, the Bodhisattva's life—the life that is depicted in the *Prajñāpāramitā*—is behovely because it is the useless life. All that meditation and study and Right Livelihood culminates in the experience of being happy just being

yourself, with nothing in particular to do. You might just be dancing around the room, aimlessly, unselfconsciously—not trying to be playful or spontaneous, but just being yourself. Some busybody will then turn up, of course, and say ‘Come on, what are you wasting your time like that for? There’s work to get on with.’ But that’s putting the cart before the horse (or rather, harnessing the horse to the cart).

Someone came to me once and said that he did not feel that he could be very useful because he had no particular talent. I told him, ‘Think of yourself as an unspecialized human being.’ People think that if they can’t make themselves useful in some way—they can’t type, they can’t keep accounts, they can’t cook, they can’t write or give a talk or paint or play a musical instrument—there’s something wrong with them. But consider: this apparently useless human being is the product of millions upon millions of years of evolution. You are the goal; you are what it has all been for. You don’t have to justify your existence by being useful. You yourself are the justification for your existence. You haven’t come into existence after all these millions of years of evolution just to sit down in front of a typewriter, or to keep accounts. *You* are the justification of that whole process. You are an end in yourself. All that you can really be said to be here for is to develop into some higher form of human life—to become a Bodhisattva, to become a Buddha. So don’t be ashamed of sitting around and doing nothing. Glory in it. Do things spontaneously, out of a state of inner satisfaction and achievement. It is a virtue to be ornamental as well as useful.

If you take this seriously, you have to be watchful for people trying to work on your feelings of guilt. How can you be spontaneous if you’re riddled with guilt? So don’t let people get at you with any kind of emotional blackmail. If someone starts saying to you ‘Look how hard I’m working for the Dharma! Don’t you feel bad just sitting there doing nothing, letting me do it all?’ you should just say ‘No, I feel fine. I’m really enjoying watching you do it all.’ It is important not to give in to this sort of emotional arm-twisting; it is highly unskillful, appealing to negative emotions in order to get things done instead of arousing an enthusiasm to work for the joy of it. Don’t take your Buddhist activities too earnestly. I am not advocating irresponsible frivolity or a frittering away of energy in unmindful hilarity. But even while you are doing your best to succeed at whatever you are doing, remember that you are essentially at play—and you don’t lose sleep over a game; it isn’t worth it. Being serious doesn’t mean being solemn, just as practising puja in front of a shrine does not call for long faces and a ‘dim religious light’.

There is something further to take into account when we look at the spirit in which we approach Dharmic activities: the question of psychological types or temperaments. For example, there are people who are 'organized', and there are others who are 'non-organized'. Organized types tend to do the organizing, and non-organized types are the people the organized types organize, often whether the non-organized like it or not. But just because you don't function in that organized way, it doesn't necessarily mean that you are lazy or less committed, or even that you are doing less than those who *are* organized. It is possible to function positively and creatively and energetically in a way that is anathema to the organized type.

Unfortunately, any kind of collective Buddhist activity nearly always caters for those who like being organized—and those with the opposite sort of temperament tend to get roped in willy-nilly. But why not cater for the non-organized person occasionally? Why not have a non-organized retreat, with no programme to it at all? Call it a 'Dharma holiday'—all the retreat facilities would be there, but it would be up to you how you went about benefiting from them. Some people might want to get together, elect a leader, and organize a programme, but others would go their own way and still have a very productive retreat. Some might even decide—in the most mindful, objective, responsible, and positive way—that the best thing to do with this Dharma holiday would be to get up late and sit in the garden doing nothing. For some people this could be quite a challenge; even on a retreat it is possible to fill up the day with useful activities in such a way as to lose sight of the greater mandala.

The Bodhisattva has resolved this opposition or antithesis between aesthetic contemplation on the one hand and practical activity on the other, and feels no conflict. But so long as we have to switch over from the one to the other, and so long as the presence or experience of the one implies the absence or non-experience of the other, there will always be some difficulty in the transition. All we can do is somehow try to carry the aesthetic experience into the practical activity—which is exactly what the Bodhisattva does, as represented in the Perfection of Wisdom—a very difficult process. We can make a start by adopting a more light-hearted attitude towards practical things. By all means be useful, but only within the much larger context of complete uselessness. Taoism is quite good on this whole theme. Taoists say that the man of Tao is like a great tree, which is so big that it is good for nothing—the branches are too thick for making axe-handles, and so on. One should try to be too big to be useful. However

important the work a Bodhisattva does, he or she sees, in the Perfection of Wisdom, that it takes place in a tiny circle within the greater mandala of quite pointless appreciation.

This, then, is the vision of the Perfection of Wisdom. If, when we take up the *Ratnagūṇa-samcayagāthā*, we find that it resists our attempts to make sense of it, if it refuses to be contained by our intellectual expectations, this is because it is not supposed to be useful to us in any way that we can understand. It speaks to us in the common currency of all our intellectual transactions, but in such a way as to demonstrate that it is coming from somewhere altogether different. It comes—so to speak—from the greater mandala.