

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Similes from the *Diamond Cutter Sutra*—Part I

In the sutras, the Buddha often gave similes to help his disciples understand an underlying principle. A concise but powerful verse from the *Diamond Cutter Sutra* contains nine similes that help us understand dependent arising, emptiness, impermanence, and the nature of dukkha. This verse is often recited before teachings to help guide our minds and make them receptive.

A star, a visual aberration, a flame of a lamp,
an illusion, a dewdrop, a water bubble,
a dream, a flash of lightning, a cloud,
see conditioned things as such.

The first three similes—a star, a visual aberration, and the flame of a lamp—illustrate conditioned things’ emptiness of inherent existence as well as their nature of dependent arising. The simile of an illusion, while also illustrating emptiness and dependent arising, specifically indicates the way in which we are drawn into dukkha by believing these false appearance to be true. The simile of the dewdrop illustrates the impermanence and instability of the conditioned things of cyclic existence, while the simile of the water bubble indicates that feelings—be they pleasurable, painful, or neutral—all have the fault of being unsatisfactory in nature. The similes of a dream, a flash of lightning, and a cloud illustrate the emptiness of inherent existence.

The meaning of the similes is potent. In addition to using reasoning to reflect on emptiness or impermanence, you can include any of these nine similes in your meditation. The fact that we often observe stars, dewdrops, water bubbles, dreams, lightning, clouds, and so forth in our daily lives will spark the memory of the meaning of these similes to arise in our minds when we are not in formal meditation too.

THE SIMILE OF A STAR

The simile of a star illustrates that conditioned things both appear and are empty. That is their nature. Stars do not appear in the daytime; so too conventional truths do not appear to an arya's meditative equipoise on emptiness. However, stars appear at night; similarly conventionalities appear to conventional consciousnesses.

In terms of its ultimate way of existence, everything is empty of existing from its own side. In terms of its conventional way of existence, it exists nominally and performs its own functions. For example, the nature of fire is to burn, and the nature of water is cohesion.

Here we are talking about the two truths—ultimate truth and conventional truth—or the ultimate and conventional natures in terms of one object. With respect to a book, the lack of its inherent existence is its ultimate nature and the dependently arising book itself is its conventional nature.

A thing's ultimate way of existing is the object realized by the arya's nonconceptual wisdom focused on emptiness. In other words, its ultimate way of existing is the object found by an arya's nonconceptual meditative equipoise mind directly realizing the ultimate. This is a valid mind realizing the ultimate. Phenomena's conventional or nominal nature is the object found by a valid mind realizing conventionalities.

The simile of a star gives us insight into these two aspects of phenomena. In the daytime, we cannot see the stars. All we can see is the open and empty sky. Just as no stars appear in the empty sky during the daytime, no conventional phenomenon appears to the arya's wisdom of meditative equipoise. For that wisdom, there are no dualistic appearances—no appearances of a difference between subject and object, no appearance of true existence, and no appearance of conventionalities. There is no conceptual appearance that acts like a veil that obscures the mind from directly perceiving emptiness. All such appearances have been pacified; there are no such appearances to that mind. The arya's wisdom of meditative equipoise sees only the empty nature of phenomena, without seeing the phenomena themselves.

The wisdom of meditative equipoise itself is a conventional truth, so it does not appear to the arya's wisdom of meditative equipoise. In other words, the mind that is meditating on emptiness does not appear to the mind that is meditating on emptiness. Only emptiness appears to that mind.

Prior to being able to see a thing's ultimate nature, we must go through the process of investigating and understanding that the object cannot be self-existent as it appears because of being a dependent arising. However, the arya's wisdom of meditative equipoise that arises due to this investigation does not see the object as dependent. All it sees is the emptiness of the object.

If the wisdom of meditative equipoise could see conventional phenomena and the dependent nature of the phenomena, it would mean that instead of being a nonconceptual realization, that wisdom would be a conceptual mind. In this context, *conceptual* and *nonconceptual* have different meanings than usual. Here, *nonconceptual* specifically refers to there being no superstitions, no preconceptions, and no conceptualization of inherent existence in the mind at that time. This mind is nonconceptual in the sense that it is free from dualistic appearances—the appearance of true existence, of subject and object being different, and of conventional phenomena. The mind that realizes the conventional existence of the object—its dependent nature—is a conceptual mind in the sense that it has these three dualistic appearances.

In the daytime only the sky appears and not the stars, even though the stars exist during the day. Similarly, only emptiness and no conventional phenomena appear to an arya's wisdom of meditative equipoise, even though conventional phenomena still exist. However, just as the stars not appearing during the day does not mean they are totally nonexistent, conventional truths not appearing to an arya's meditative equipoise does not mean they are totally nonexistent.

The sky or space in the simile also recalls the advice of the great masters to meditate on space-like emptiness, which means meditating on the nonexistence of any inherently existent object. We know that we are not meditating on the total nonexistence of anything whatsoever but on the nonexistence of the thing existing from its own side. The object of our meditation is only the emptiness of true existence; it is not the emptiness of all existence. At this time, we are not thinking about the object; we are not considering that although it is empty of self-existence, it does exist as a dependent arising.

Outside of meditative equipoise, all sorts of conventionalities appear to the various conventional consciousnesses. Due to the influence of true-grasping ignorance, things appear to be truly existent and to exist from

their own side. These appearances are false—they do not exist in the way they appear. Due to having realized emptiness, we will know these appearances as false and will not believe that they exist truly as they appear.

A visual consciousness realizing blue is a valid mind realizing blue; it is a valid cognizer realizing a conventional phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is a consciousness that is contaminated by one or both of two factors: ignorance or the latencies of ignorance. The reason we say it is contaminated by one or both of these is that even an arhat—somebody who has completely abandoned ignorance—has some consciousnesses that are contaminated by the latencies of ignorance.

We have so many conventional consciousnesses that engage with such a wide spectrum of objects. To each of these consciousnesses, its object appears to be truly existent. All these consciousnesses are mistaken in this way. Nevertheless, among them, many will be valid minds, because from the point of view of realizing their objects, they are valid. The visual consciousness apprehending blue sees blue; it does not see yellow. But it is mistaken because the blue appears to exist inherently.

In the simile, stars appearing at night are like those same conventional phenomena appearing to those consciousnesses that are contaminated by ignorance or the latencies of ignorance. Bearing in mind the three types of dualistic appearance, we can also say that the stars not appearing during the daytime is like the absence of any appearance of true existence to the arya's wisdom of meditative equipoise. The stars appearing during the night is like the appearances of true existence to those consciousnesses that are contaminated by ignorance or the latencies of ignorance.

THE SIMILE OF A VISUAL ABERRATION

The term *rabrib*, translated here as “visual aberration,” is sometimes translated as “cataract,” although that is not its actual meaning. *Rabrib* refers to a condition found in the elderly, although it can affect others as well. A person with this ailment may have a clean bowl in front of him but see fine hairs falling into it. The appearance of falling hairs is true for the person who has that illness and to whom the hairs appear. However, it is not true from the perspective of somebody whose sight is unaffected by such an illness. If it were true in general, then even people who are not afflicted by that illness would have the appearance of falling hairs, which is clearly not the case.

Likewise, to a consciousness contaminated by ignorance or its latencies, the object appears truly existent, and for that contaminated consciousness, the object truly exists as it appears. Of course, that does not mean that the object actually is truly existent. The appearance of things as existing from their own side is not true from the perspective of the arya's wisdom of meditative equipoise. Just as healthy eyes do not see falling hairs, an arya's meditative equipoise on emptiness does not see existence from its own side.

Both of the examples so far—the star and the visual aberration—show that things are not self-existent. If things were truly existent as they appear to the mind affected by ignorance and its latencies, that true existence would be the ultimate mode of existence of that phenomenon, and it would be found by an arya's wisdom realizing the ultimate way of existence. But, in fact, that wisdom realizes the nonexistence of truly existent things.

Think about it: A person with an eye disease feels very strongly that falling hairs are there. For him the very fact that he can see them so clearly seems proof that they exist. We need to reason with this person, saying, "Look, if it were true that falling hairs are present the way they appear to you, then everyone else should be able to see them. Somebody whose eyes are healthy should be able to see those hairs falling even more clearly than you do. Yet this is not the case. Not only does she not see the hairs more clearly, she does not see them at all!"

Although there are no hairs falling as they appear to that visual perception affected by this illness, the appearance of falling hairs does exist. Likewise, although things appear truly existent to a mind contaminated by ignorance or its latencies despite the fact that things are not truly existent, that appearance does exist. This is important: In terms of the simile, the *appearance* of hair falling exists, even though the falling hairs do not. Likewise, the appearance of true existence to our everyday consciousnesses exists, even though there is no true existence.

We may think that things are truly existent simply because that's the way they appear to us. But we need to be able to reason to ourselves and understand that true existence appears only because the consciousness to which it appears is flawed in that it is contaminated by ignorance and its latencies.

An omniscient mind definitely realizes conventional truths. Conventional truths exist, and because a Buddha's mind is omniscient, it knows

everything that exists. Conventional truths appear to an omniscient mind, but they do not appear to it as if they were truly existent. In other words, conventional truths do not appear truly existent to all minds to which they appear.

Since enlightened beings are forever free from all obscurations, things do not appear truly existent to them. Buddhas are omniscient and perceive everything that exists. Since the appearance of true existence is an existent phenomenon (although true existence itself is not), it must appear to a buddha's mind. Since the mistaken appearances that appear to each sentient being do exist, a buddha realizes those appearances and at the same time realizes that although things appear truly existent to those sentient beings, they are not truly existent. Just because the appearance of true existence appears to a buddha and a buddha realizes that appearance does not mean that things appear as if they were truly existent to a buddha. A buddha realizes the appearance of true existence because it appears to sentient beings and a buddha knows what appears to sentient beings. There is huge difference between having the appearance of true existence because one's mind is contaminated by ignorance or its latencies and realizing the appearance of true existence because it is an existent phenomenon appearing to the minds of others.

All aryas, including bodhisattvas on the seven impure grounds and the three pure grounds, still have the appearance of true existence after they arise from meditative equipoise on emptiness. Bodhisattvas who have initially entered the Mahayana—as opposed to those who became hearer and solitary-realizer arhats before entering the Mahayana—do not eliminate the grasping at true existence until the eighth ground, and they, too, have the appearance of true existence when not in meditative equipoise on emptiness. The bodhisattvas on the three pure grounds—the eighth, ninth, and tenth grounds—have eliminated the grasping at true existence and its seeds, but they still have cognitive obscurations and thus also have the appearance of true existence when they are not in meditative equipoise.

Only at buddhahood has the subtle obscuration of the appearance of true existence been totally eradicated from the mind. Enlightened beings realize the two truths simultaneously and directly, unmediated by conceptuality. They do not have to think about ultimate truths in order to realize them. Nor must they switch their focus and think about conventional truths in order to realize them. Thus only a buddha can realize the four noble truths

directly at the same time and with one mind. That is because three of the four noble truths—the noble truths of dukkha, origin, and path—are conventional truths, while the noble truth of cessation is an ultimate truth. Only buddhas can directly perceive the two truths simultaneously.

THE SIMILE OF THE FLAME OF A LAMP

The third simile is the flame of a butter lamp or an oil lamp. It illustrates that phenomena need to be properly and correctly posited on a conventional level despite the fact that they are empty of self-existence. The flame of a lamp does not naturally exist in the lamp. It arises due to the assemblage of a variety of causes and conditions, such as the oil, the wick, matches, and so on. In the same way, all phenomena—dharma—of cyclic existence and nirvana do not inherently exist but come into being due to the aggregation of many factors. Within knowing they are empty, we still need to be able to posit them unmistakably.

Nirvana means “liberation.” The dharmas of nirvana are the factors that nirvana depends upon. They include the practices that we do in order to attain liberation. The dharmas of cyclic existence are what cyclic existence depends on—the afflictions and karma that lead us to take rebirth in fortunate and unfortunate realms.

In many sutras, the Buddha says:

When this exists, that comes to be;
with the arising of this, that arises.
When this does not exist, that does not come to be;
with the cessation of this, that ceases.⁵⁵

In the context of the twelve links of dependent arising, the first two lines indicate how cyclic existence evolves. With ignorance as the condition, karmic formations arise. Depending upon that, consciousness arises. With each successive link depending on the previous one arise name and form, the six senses, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, existence, birth, and aging and death.

In the last two lines the Buddha indicates how cyclic existence is ceased: When ignorance is overcome, karmic formations cease. When karmic formations stop, consciousness ceases, and so forth. In short, by stopping

ignorance, all twelve links cease, cyclic existence ends, and nirvana is attained.

Due to ignorance and its latencies, phenomena appear to us to exist truly. Although we do not necessarily grasp things as truly existent in the very next moment after the appearance of true existence, in many cases that grasping often follows the appearance. This is the first of the twelve links, ignorance. Based upon this grasping, other afflictions such as attachment and anger arise. Motivated by these afflictions, we engage in all sorts of actions, which constitute the second link, karmic formations. These karmas cause us to be born again in cyclic existence and to experience its multitude of dukkha, as found in the links of consciousness, name and form, six sense sources, contact, feeling, birth, and aging and death. So all the miseries that sentient beings experience arise due to grasping things as existing in a way that is the complete opposite to how they really exist.

The above describes one series of events—one set of twelve links—beginning with the ignorance that is the root of cyclic existence, which leads to the arising of disturbing emotions, which create karma, which results in rebirth in cyclic existence with all its attendant dukkha. The second series begins in the opposite way; it begins with the wisdom understanding that phenomena are empty of inherent existence and it leads to liberation.

The flame of a lamp is the simile for the arising and ceasing of things due to the presence or absence of their causes and conditions. Even though the flame does not exist from its own side, it does exist through depending upon various factors. In the same way, all dharmas of cyclic existence and nirvana lack any true existence whatsoever, but they still arise and cease depending upon various causes and conditions. Just as the flame burns brightly when all of its causes are assembled, so too does our cyclic existence burn with the three types of dukkha when afflictions and karma are present. Just as the flame sputters and goes out when its fuel is consumed or when a strong wind blows, so too is the misery of cyclic existence extinguished when ignorance is destroyed or when wisdom eliminates craving and clinging.

THE SIMILE OF AN ILLUSION

We have previously discussed the simile of a magician's illusion, but we will revisit it here. A magician has the idea to conjure up the illusion of horses

and elephants, for example. The magician recites some words and casts a spell so that the sticks and pebbles—the bases of the illusion—appear as horses and elephants. Perhaps he must apply some ointment or special substance to the sticks and pebbles as well. By his completing the procedure correctly, the sticks and pebbles then appear as horses and elephants. When the audience sees the illusory horses and elephants, not knowing that the magician has cast a spell, they believe the illusion to be real. The horses and elephants appear to the magician as well, but he does not believe them to be real, and a person who arrives later sees only sticks and pebbles, no horses and elephants.

The experience of watching television is similar. We see all sorts of things in it. Although no one has cast a spell enabling us to see the people, animals, jungles, forests, science labs, cities, and so forth, the television has the ability to show all of these faraway things and places. When an adult looks at the television screen, she knows that even though people appear in it, there are not people there the way it appears. She knows that whatever she sees is simply an appearance on the television. However, someone who is very young or does not know what a television is might think there are real people there and want to go talk with them! A third person arrives later, after the television has been switched off. He does not see anything on the screen, and he also does not believe anyone or anything is there inside the television.

To understand this simile, we need to understand the three people. Two experience the appearance, and one does not. Of the two that have the appearance of people on the screen, one believes it to exist as it appears, while the other one does not. The third person has neither the appearance of the illusion nor does he believe it is true.

If the magician conjures up something very beautiful, attachment arises in the minds of the audience. If he conjures up something ugly, the audience becomes upset and angry. Similarly, someone watching the television who does not know or forgets that it is only an appearance on a screen will be filled with attachment when seeing something desirable and will react with fear or anger when seeing something repulsive. While nothing on the television will actually benefit or harm him, by believing the appearances to be true he is drawn into *dukkha*.

Just like in these examples, in real life things appear to us as if they exist from their own side. Then we grasp that appearance as real. We believe in,

assent to, and do not question that appearance, and grasp things as existing from their own side. Then when some things appear attractive to us, we yearn for them with craving; when other things appear frightening, we recoil with fear or anger. All of our emotions and the actions they motivate stem from things appearing to us as existing from their own side and our grasping at them as existing in the way they appear.

Like the audience in the simile who has the appearance of horses and elephants and believes them to be true, ordinary sentient beings who have not realized emptiness not only have the appearance of inherent existence but also grasp things to exist inherently. Like the magician to whom horses and elephants appear although he does not grasp them as real, people who have realized emptiness but are not in meditative equipoise on emptiness at the moment have the appearance of inherent existence but do not grasp things to exist that way. They know that as vivid as the appearance of inherent existence is, it is false. Like the latecomers who neither see horses and elephants nor believe them to be there, aryas in meditative equipoise on emptiness neither have the appearance of inherent existence nor grasp at inherent existence. In addition, all consciousnesses of a buddha have no appearance of true existence and also no grasping at true existence.

Things appear truly existent, don't they? When a person says, "There is nothing that is truly existent," somebody might reply, "But they appear truly existent. So aren't they truly existent since they appear that way?" This person needs to understand that things can appear to exist in a certain way without actually existing in that way. These appearances are deceptive and false. Although we may know this on an intellectual level, we often forget it, especially when something appears to us that gives us pleasure or pain.

Although the illusions that a magician creates do not exist as they appear, the audience members will still feel desire toward an illusion that is beautiful and fear or aversion toward horrible scenes. The attachment and fear they feel are really there. Similarly, we may feel craving or disgust after watching a movie even though there were only appearances on the screen.

Similar to the audience at a magic show or a child in front of a television, who are frightened by the appearance of stampeding animals, sentient beings are tormented by the dukkha of cyclic existence. Not knowing that things do not truly exist as they appear, sentient beings grasp beautiful and disgusting appearances as true, and based on that grasping, their mental afflictions arise. Once the mental afflictions have arisen in their minds,

even though they want happiness and they do not want suffering, they act in ways that cause unwished-for suffering. As a result, sentient beings are continually reborn in cyclic existence and are tormented by the various types of *duhkha*. This huge tragedy is all due to the mistaken appearances and our grasping them to be true as they appear. When we realize that these appearances are false and that things do not exist truly as they appear to, we will be released from the tumultuous emotional reactions we have toward them. The actions motivated by those disturbing emotions will cease, as will the karma and perplexities of life in cyclic existence.

In the simile, there is a cause for the appearance of the illusory horses and elephants. Likewise, in the case of things appearing truly existent, there is a cause. It is a deep cause, one that is not easily evident—the mind grasping true existence itself. This does not mean that this moment's grasping at true existence is itself creating the appearance of things being truly existent. Rather, we have been grasping at things as truly existent since beginningless time, so things appear truly existent due to ignorance and its latencies. Previous moments of the ignorance grasping true existence are responsible for later appearances of things as truly existent. Even if someone has eliminated the grasping at true existence, he or she can still have the appearance of true existence due to the latencies of ignorance. These latencies are responsible for the appearance of true existence, whether we have realized emptiness or not.

In the case of illusory horses and elephants and appearances of people in the television, a superficial condition brings about their appearance. In both cases, it is possible for someone who has not realized emptiness to know that the appearance is false. Even though the deep cause—true-grasping or its latencies—may still exist in that person's mind, it is not responsible for the illusory animals and the spectacular things appearing on the television. Rather the spell and substance that helps to cast the spell are the superficial cause for the appearance of illusory horses and elephants, and the television, electricity, and film studio are causes for the appearances on the television.

Let's take it a step further. The horses and elephants in the illusion also appear to be truly existent. The appearance of the horses and elephants being truly existent is due to the deep cause, the true-grasping ignorance and its latencies. In other words, the audience has two mistaken appearances. One is the appearance of horses and elephants where there are none;

the other is the appearance of true existence where there is none. The first appearance is caused by a superficial cause of error—the spells and substances used by the magician. The second is caused by a deep cause of error—the true-grasping ignorance and its latencies. The first appearance can be realized as false by someone who arrives at the magic show late. The second appearance—the appearance of true existence—is known to be false only by someone who has realized emptiness.

In summary, the simile of the illusion illustrates that things do not exist truly as they appear. Just as these false appearances appear to the audience due to causes (the spell and special substance of the magician) so too does the appearance of true existence appear to sentient beings due to causes (ignorance and its latencies). Once we realize emptiness nonconceptually, we will begin the process of eradicating the true-grasping ignorance and then its latencies that cause the false appearance of true existence. The peace of nonabiding nirvana—the nirvana of a buddha in which one abides in neither samsara nor personal liberation—will follow.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Similes from the *Diamond Cutter Sutra*—Part II

THE SIMILE OF A DEWDROP

If we look outside in the early morning, we see dewdrops on the tips of the blades of grass. Twinkling in the sunlight, they look so beautiful. But they are unstable; once the sun rises and its warm light shines on the grass, the dewdrops dry up. This simile illustrates that conditioned things do not endure for long. They come into existence and perish in the same moment.

When we make something—let’s say we construct a building or cook a meal—from the very moment it is made, it is constantly changing until eventually it falls apart and totally vanishes—the building falls down, the food is eaten. This is coarse impermanence. Subtle impermanence is the arising and vanishing of things in each moment, never remaining for another instant. Due to their subtle impermanence, which we are usually oblivious to, one day they will totally disintegrate and fall apart, manifesting their coarse impermanence.

Impermanent things change moment by moment, without our having to do anything to cause that change. It is their nature not to remain in the next instant. The Buddha taught that all conditioned things have the aspect of *nonexistence* in that they do not exist as something that will endure. Because they do not endure, they are not reliable or secure. For this reason, we should not count on the things and people of cyclic existence to remain the same. They are constantly changing—arising and ceasing—disintegrating from one moment to the next. True cessations and nirvana, on the other hand, are permanent. Once attained, we need not fear that they will dissolve and leave us bereft.

THE SIMILE OF A WATER BUBBLE

This same simile appeared above when we discussed the similes the Buddha gave to illustrate the emptiness of the five aggregates. Here, again, feelings are described by the simile of a bubble of water. While a water bubble remains, its nature is water. Even after it has burst and has absorbed into the rest of the water, its nature is still water. So it is with feelings too. As a sutra said, “All feelings whatsoever are unsatisfactory.”⁵⁶

Contaminated feelings are so called because they are associated with ignorance and afflictions. They arise under the influence of ignorance and exist in a mindstream that has not yet eliminated ignorance. Because they are under the influence of ignorance, afflictions, and karma, these feelings—be they pleasant, painful, or neutral—experienced by samsaric beings are unsatisfactory by nature.

It is not difficult to understand that painful feelings are unsatisfactory—all sentient beings recognize that. It is harder to understand that contaminated feelings of happiness and pleasure are also unsatisfactory, because when we experience samsaric happiness we think it’s great. In order to get it, we try to get all sorts of possessions, travel to beautiful places, and have many friends, believing these will give us the experience of happiness. When we get what we seek, we are satisfied and satiated for a time. But if we keep doing what seemed so pleasurable, it eventually becomes painful. In addition, even if these pleasant feelings fade naturally, painful disappointment arises in their stead.

We ordinary beings think there is a difference between the feelings of happiness (pleasure), pain (suffering), and neutrality. We believe some feelings are better and more desirable than others. We consider painful feelings as bad and do not like them; we believe that contaminated happiness is really great. However, for an arya there is no difference between any of these feelings because they are all unsatisfactory and aren’t desirable in the least. To these beings who have realized reality directly, there is not enough happiness in cyclic existence to fit on the tip of a needle. Having abandoned attachment to all of cyclic existence and therefore to all the enjoyments of cyclic existence, they do not seek these things and do not derive contaminated happiness from them. For example, when aryas eat what we consider to be delicious food, they do not think, “Wow, this is fantastic,” and become attached to it. They simply regard it as temporary happiness and enjoy it

as such. While we run around pursuing contaminated pleasure, they see it as useless and would much rather turn their attention to more worthwhile things, such as ethical conduct, concentration, bodhichitta, and wisdom.

However, this does not mean aryas are bereft of happiness. In fact, they experience immense happiness; much more than we beings in cyclic existence do! For example, they have the happiness of true cessation and the happiness of the true path. They are close to the everlasting happiness of liberation or full enlightenment. For us, happiness means the short-term pleasures of samsara, the good feelings from having possessions, talking to friends, receiving praise, having a good reputation, and so on. Aryas are not seduced into believing these things will bring them ultimate happiness and are therefore not upset when they are separated from them. Seeing them as helpful to sustain the body and therefore attain liberation, they make use of these items.

These three contaminated feelings are included in the first of the four noble truths, which is called “true dukkha for the aryas” or “what is in truth unsatisfactory for the aryas.” For aryas, who have firm determination to be free from cyclic existence and have directly realized emptiness, all contaminated feelings of happiness, pain, and neutrality are the same. As said in the four seals, “All contaminated phenomena are unsatisfactory.” While painful feelings are the dukkha of pain, pleasant feelings are the dukkha of change. Contaminated neutral feelings are also unsatisfactory because they are the basis for all dukkha. Being unstable, neutral feelings give way to pain or contaminated pleasure and are therefore considered the pervasive dukkha of conditioning. Aryas want nothing to do with contaminated feelings; they seek the lasting fulfillment, bliss, and joy of liberation and enlightenment.

As the simile expresses, feelings—happy, painful, and neutral—are as transient and unstable as water bubbles. No sooner do they appear than they are gone. They change easily, with the slightest alteration in conditions, and therefore cannot provide stable joy and security. It is far better to turn our minds to nirvana.

THE SIMILE OF A DREAM

A dream is a simile for things being false and not existing as they appear. Sleep is the condition that brings about the mistaken appearance in dreams.

All sorts of things appear in a dream—some are attractive and pleasant, some aren't. But whether we have a good or a bad dream, once we wake up it is no longer there. We realize that what appeared, what we thought was real, was only a dream. The people and things that appeared so vividly to us in the dream are not real at all.

For example, a young woman may want to have a child. When she is asleep, she dreams she gives birth to a child and is elated. But later in the dream, the child dies and she is devastated. However, on waking, she sees that neither the exhilarating appearance of having a child that brought her joy nor the horrible appearance of the child's death that caused her anguish is real.

Likewise, just as the child appears in the dream due to causes and conditions yet is unreal, our experiences in life appear due to our past actions even though they are not truly existent. Just as the unreal dream child invokes happiness and grief in the woman, our actions—which are unreal and do not exist from their own side—bring results which likewise do not exist from their own side.

In *Treatise on the Middle Way* (7:34) Nagarjuna said:

Like a dream, like an illusion,
like a city of gandharvas,⁵⁷
so have arising, enduring,
and ceasing been explained.

Bhavaviveka in his *Lamp of Wisdom (Prajnapradipa)* explains the simile in this way: Since when we wake up from a dream, all the things that we dreamed about have disappeared, the dream is a simile connected to the past. In other words, the simile of the dream illustrates that phenomena of the past do not inherently exist.

THE SIMILE OF A FLASH OF LIGHTNING

The simile of the flash of lightning illustrates that the phenomena of the present are not inherently existent. First the sky is clear; storm clouds gradually gather. Due to this, lightning flashes across the sky, appearing ever so quickly before vanishing. Thinking of the flash of lightning, we cannot say, "It came from here," and "It went there." Likewise, while it remains, we

cannot say, “It is in this spot,” because it occurred so very briefly. Occurring occasionally, it vanishes straightaway.

Likewise, all phenomena of the present are merely appearances to our minds. They arise due to the coming together of their causes and conditions; they do not exist at all from their own side. Just as we cannot say, “This is where the lightning came from,” “There it is,” or “That’s where it went,” from whatever angle we analyze the phenomena of the present, we are not able to find them. We may examine them from the viewpoint of agent, action, and object; scrutinize the nature of the phenomena themselves; or investigate their causes and its effects; but we will still not be able to find them. There is nothing to point to as being findable under analysis. Like the lightning, phenomena of the present disappear as soon as we start to search for them.

THE SIMILE OF A CLOUD

The simile of the cloud is connected to phenomena of the future and illustrates their lack of existence from their own side. Rain cannot fall from a completely clear sky. For rain showers to happen, first clouds must gather in the sky. Then the rain falls, and that has the potential to make crops grow, trees become full, and fruit ripen. Nevertheless, the sky itself has been clear all along. The clouds are adventitious; they arise dependent on causes and conditions.

In the same way the nature of the mind is clear light in that it totally lacks self-existence. Yet within the clear light and empty nature of the mind, the clouds of afflictions and their latencies gather. They motivate us to engage in many actions, which produce the various ripening results that we experience in the future. Like the simile of a cloud, this is a dependently arising process: Ignorance, afflictions, karmas, happy and miserable results all occur through dependence. Being dependent, they do not exist in the way they appear. They gather and disperse just like clouds, yet they seem real while they are present.

All of these causes and results exist by being merely imputed by term and concept. If they were inherently existent, causes and their results would exist at the same time. It would be as the Samkhyas believe when they assert arising from self: The results would exist in a nonmanifest form in the cause. In that case, the crops, trees, and fruit would have to already exist

inside the rainclouds that are their cause, and there would be no need for the rain to produce them.

The Tibetan word for future means “that which has not yet come.” If any resultant phenomenon were inherently existent, it would not need to depend on a cause to arise. That is because something that exists inherently already has its own entity. Something that already has its own entity does not need to arise; it already exists and so doesn’t need to be produced.

Conventionally existent causes and results do not need to meet, but inherently existent ones would have to meet. If they didn’t meet, how could one produce the other? There would be a time gap between them. But if they met, they would occur at the same time, in which case a sprout would already exist, and it wouldn’t be necessary for a seed to produce it.

In general, for a result to arise, its cause must cease. That means that the result comes about through the ceasing of its cause. There are two ways in which a cause gradually transforms into the result. In one way, the cause ceases to be seen. For example, when a huge tree grows from a seed, the seed has disappeared, and we no longer see it. In the second way, there is a continuity of a similar type. For example, when we cook rice, the rice undergoes a transformation by changing constantly, moment by moment. At the end, we still see something that we call “rice,” although it is not the same as the rice before it was cooked.

We may think, “My mother is the cause of me. Are you saying that she has to cease for me to be born?” Of course not. However, our mother when we were born was not the same as our mother when we were a toddler. She had changed moment by moment, even though she still had the same label, “my mother.”

The ceasing of the cause and the arising of the result are simultaneous, yet we know that when we were born our mother did not cease to exist. So when we say the cause ceases when the result arises, it does not mean the cause utterly ceases to exist or the person dies. Rather, it means that it undergoes momentary change in which case the earlier moments in the continuity cease while later moments of that continuity arise. The continuity of our mother exists after we were born.

Causal dependence—causes producing results and results arising from causes—is one type of dependent arising. This demonstrates that things do not exist from their own side, independent of anything else. It also proves that things do not exist as they appear. This resembles the simile of the

cloud: First there is the clear sky, then clouds form in it, the rain falls, and the crops and plants in the earth below are nourished and grow. All along one thing happens depending on another. None of this could take place if things existed from their own side.

CONCLUSION: SEE CONDITIONED PHENOMENA AS SUCH

The last line of this verse, which also marks the conclusion of the *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, says, “See conditioned things as such.” That is, all conditioned phenomena are like these nine similes, from the star down to the cloud. We should look at all conditioned phenomena in this way.

In addition, unconditioned phenomena, such as emptiness and unconditioned space, are not self-existent, because they, too, are dependent. Emptiness depends on its basis. That is, the emptiness of the table depends on there being a table that is empty of true existence. The emptiness of John depends on John.

Seeing all phenomena as such means to see them as empty of inherent existence, not existing as they appear and not findable when searched for in their basis of designation. That is, although they are empty they appear, and while they appear they are also empty. These two are not contradictory.

All nine similes are applicable to all phenomena because all phenomena do not exist as they appear and all of them cannot be found when we search for them just as shown in these similes. This is true in the case of the self, others, cyclic existence, and nirvana. These are the same in that they are all mere imputation by name and do not exist inherently on their basis of designation. Nevertheless, because the six consciousnesses—from the visual consciousness up to the mental consciousness—are contaminated by ignorance and its latencies, the objects of those consciousnesses all appear truly existent to them. The way conventional phenomena appear and the way they exist are discordant because ignorance and its latencies, which have colored our minds since beginningless time, distort the way those things appear to us.

