

# What makes awakening possible?

Fifth in a series of lectures presented at Leiden University  
by Richard Hayes in the autumn of 2009

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## 1. Introductory remarks

The question for today's lecture is: "What makes awakening possible?" This question can be approached as a special application of the more general question: "What makes *anything* possible?" Stated another way, the question might be "How does something move from being a possibility to being an actuality?" Before considering the question of what makes awakening possible—or, of how a sentient being moves from being a possible buddha to an actual buddha—let me talk more generally about how potentials are actualized.

## 2. Potentials as discussed by Indian philosophers

The English word "potential" is derived from the Latin verb "possum, posse, potuī," which means "to be able, to be powerful." The Sanskrit counterpart of that verb is "śaknoti," which also means "to be able, to be powerful." From this Sanskrit verb we get the verbal noun "śakti," which means "power, capacity, ability, potentiality."

When Sanskrit-writing philosophers discuss potentiality (*śakti*), one of the questions they usually raise is: where does the *śakti* reside? To whom does it belong? This same question, incidentally, also occurred to Aristotle. His solution was that a potential is a power that resides in one being but that requires an external being to trigger it. This led him to conclude that God, being the prime mover and therefore not requiring anything external to prompt him into action, has no potentials; for Aristotle, God is pure activity.

A second question that comes up is: how is it possible to know that something has a potential to do something when it has not yet manifested the actuality for which it has a potential?

### 2.1. Where does a potential reside?

In an earlier lecture, we talked about some of the Buddhist arguments against the doctrine that the world was produced by a single creator. One of the considerations in that discussion is to do with this whole problem of where *śakti* resides. The outline of the argument is as follows:

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1. If the *śakti* to produce the world resides in the creator, then it is either self-actualized or it requires something from outside to trigger it.
2. If a creator's *śakti* requires something from the outside to trigger it, then we should say it is really that outside thing that is responsible for creation; the creator is merely an instrument by which that outside thing performs the creation.
3. On the other hand, if a creator's potential is self-actualized, then it is reasonable to ask why the potential is realized at a particular time and not a moment earlier or later.
4. Moreover, it is reasonable to ask how a potential is realized without any change taking place in the being that possesses the potential.

One Buddhist philosopher who elaborated on this argument was Manorathanandin, a commentator on Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*. He notes that God is described as an eternal being and that it is accepted by those who believe in eternal beings that there is no way a being can be eternal if it undergoes change. But such a God cannot be the creator of the world, says Manorathanandin. Not only can a permanent being not actually create anything, he suggests, but it cannot even try to do anything, for even the mental effort necessary to form an intention to act requires some change in the being, namely, the change involved in going from the state of not having an intention to the state of having it. Since effort is the cause of action, an effort, or an intention to act, can be seen as a potential action. If God is an eternal being, he cannot even have the potential to act. Manorathanandin defines a cause as that in the absence of which the effect does not arise; since an eternal being is never absent, it cannot be a cause. If a cause were defined as that in the presence of which an effect is present, then every eternal being, such as space (*ākāśa*), would have to be regarded as the cause of everything, in which case there would be no justification for singling out God as a creator.

The premise that the Buddhists are operating on is that being a cause necessarily involves some kind of change in the cause. If, for example, one observes the growth of a plant from a seed, one can observe the role played by the soil and the seed and other factors that contribute to the growth of the plant. The plant grows as a result of the interaction of all these factors, and all these factors are changed in the process of contributing to the plant's growth. The plant acquires certain characteristics by taking them from the soil, which leaves the soil in an altered state. As the plant grows, all the factors from which it acquires its own characteristics lose something in the process. From such observations we can derive the conclusion that whatever participates as a causal factor in the birth or growth of something else undergoes observable changes in nature. There can be no role played by a factor that does not undergo such changes in nature. Therefore, no eternal being can participate in the changes that take place in the empirical world.

Dharmakīrti anticipates an objection that might be raised by those who believe in divine participation. Suppose, they say, that this creation of the world by God were similar to a sense-faculty's contacting a sense-object. The sense-faculty undergoes no change while it serves as a cause of awareness, nor does the sensible object. So, for example, when the eyes are open in the presence of a visible color, neither the eye nor the sensed color undergoes

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change, and yet both serve as causes of vision. God could very well function in just the same way. This objection, answers Dharmakīrti, rests upon a false premise. The fact is that a sense-organ *does* undergo change. In looking at this issue from a modern perspective, one might make an argument along these lines: A sense-faculty functions to cause awareness because it has a potential to do so. This potential is in the form of an amount of energy that is held in reserve. But once that energy is used to produce some effect, it ceases to exist and must be replaced by another quantity of energy. Any action involves a change from a potential state to an actual state, and any change from potentiality to actuality therefore involves some change in the levels of energy in whatever participates in the action. Therefore if God participates in the world in the same way that a sense-faculty participates in awareness, he must undergo changes in energy levels, and if he undergoes such changes, he cannot be eternal.

The issue of *śakti* or potentiality comes up in other contexts. One of those contexts is in the realm of what we would call philosophy of mind, which deals with, among other questions, whether the material body is the sole cause of mental activities such as awareness and emotional engagement. In India there were materialists who argued that consciousness arises as what scientists and philosophers today call an emergent property. The idea is that a single piece of matter, such as a neuron, is not conscious. But if one puts a network of billions of neurons together, there emerges from the network properties and functions that none of the single items in the network had on their own, namely, awareness, volition, memory and so forth.

The materialists in India, like materialists today, denied the possibility of rebirth. Rebirth, they said, requires the transmission of some kind of consciousness from one physical body to another. But that is impossible, because consciousness depends on a living material body, and when a body ceases to be alive, then the consciousness it supported must come to an end. In other words, the materialist argues against the possibility of a succession of connected lives, since there is nothing material to carry the mind from one material body to another. And yet, says Dharmakīrti, the materialist argues that observable matter itself has the potential to generate consciousness. If it is granted, however, that the observable material body had the capacity to generate one's consciousness at the beginning of the present life, one may ask what feature of the material body is lost at death that results in the loss of the capacity to create consciousness. The body, after all, continues to be observable. Dharmakīrti's aim in asking this rhetorical question is that since itself matter continues to have the same nature after one dies as it had during life, the materialist is hard pressed to explain why consciousness does not continue to be generated by a material body even after it has died.

In replying to the materialist argument, Dharmakīrti asserts that there is no part of the material world in which one does not find some kind of sentient creatures living. This would suggest that every kind of matter has the potential to produce life, and therefore there is no evidence to support the materialist's claim that matter must be specially configured to support sentience. So, suggests Manorathanandin in his commentary to Dharmakīrti, the fact that some matter is evidently sentient while some matter is not cannot be accounted for by facts within the material world alone; there must be some non-material factors involved in the

production of sensation and mental events. Those non-material factors must exist independently of the physical body.<sup>1</sup>

There is one other area in which a discussion of *śakti* plays a crucial role in Buddhist philosophy. It is well known that Buddhists regarded nothing as permanent. Nothing lasts forever, but just how long does something last? In a previous lecture we saw that the Buddha said that if one must make a choice between regarding the body or the mind as the self, one would be better saying that the body is the self, for it is more stable and changes more slowly than the thoughts and emotions. This suggests that in the Buddha's view, not everything decays at the same rate. Later Buddhists, however, took the view that everything is momentary in the strictest sense of the word; that is, nothing lasts for more than a moment. In fact, everything perishes in the very act of coming into being. The very conditions that brought about the birth of a thing are also the conditions that bring about its death.

One of the principal arguments for this highly counter-intuitive view of radical momentariness rests on the claim that whatever is truly real, as opposed to being a merely conceptual construct, must realize all its *śakti* in every moment of its being. This suggests that in this context *śakti* is not being understood as potential at all, but rather as actualized power. In reality there *are* no unrealized potentials. There is no point in talking of anything having an ability or a capacity if it is not being manifested. It was by drawing on this principal that such Buddhists as Śāntarakṣita argued that if God had the potential to create the world, then he must realize that potential at every moment. But if God is eternal, then he must create the world at every moment of his existence, which means that the world, like God, can never have had a beginning. If that is so, then there is no point in speaking of the creator of the world.

Now from this principal that what has a power must exercise it at every moment it follows that if anything has the power to perish, it must realize that power in every moment of its existence. Everything that can perish must perish in every moment of its existence, which of course means that it can endure for only one moment. If it fully realizes its power to perish in its first moment, it will never have a second moment. This is the Buddhist twist on the old Upaniṣadic adage "One without a second."

As I hope this discussion of how Buddhists thought about *śakti* will show, it is at the forefront in a good variety of contexts, and Buddhists produced numerous arguments based on their way of thinking about it.<sup>2</sup> These arguments should be borne in mind when we come to a discussion of a sentient being's potential to become a buddha.

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1. For more on these arguments, see John Taber, "Dharmakīrti Against Physicalism," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 31, no. 4 (2003): 479–502. .

2. Some of these arguments are elaborated in Richard P. Hayes, "Potentiality, Indian Theories of," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward C. Craig (London: Routledge, 1998)...

## 2.2. How does one know a potential?

In addition to the metaphysical aspects of potentiality, there are certain epistemological issues that Indian philosophers took into consideration. A potential, obviously, is not something that one can know through the senses. One cannot, for example, see a seed's potential to grow into a plant, or a baby's potential to grow into an adult. And yet one feels confident in one's knowledge that a baby has the potential to become an adult. Even if through some tragedy that potential is never realized, we feel confident that the potential was there. So how is it that we know about potentials?

Some Indian philosophers said that the knowledge of potentials is so different from our knowledge of other things that there must be a special type of gaining new information that is neither quite like ordinary sense-perception nor quite like ordinary inference. Moreover, they claimed that we can know for sure only about potentials that existed in the past. We know those through the actualities that they became. To give a standard example, one cannot see the stars or the moon move. And yet if one looks at where a heavenly body is relative to a fixed reference point on earth, and then if one looks at a later time at that same heavenly body relative to that same point of reference, one will see that the heavenly body is in a different location than it used to be. A change of location is possible only if motion takes place. And for motion to have taken place, there must have been some potential for motion to occur. So we can reasonably conclude that the heavenly body had the *śakti* to move.

But what of the feeling of certainty we have about that same heavenly body still having the potential to move from where it is right now? The moon could, after all, have used up all its potential to move in getting to where it is right now, and it could very well stay where it is forever more. The philosophers who dealt with this issue had to acknowledge that there is no guarantee that something that once had a potential still has it. There is also no certainty that something has a potential simply because it belongs to a class of things that usually have that potential. Drawing conclusions about potentials is based on what Western philosophers call induction, and all induction involves an element of risk.

While it is possible to infer that something that is present had a potential in the past, it is impossible to determine whether something in the present has a potential for the future. One cannot conclude on the basis of the absence of an actuality that there is also an absence of potential. There is always the possibility that something has a potential but that an obstacle has arisen that prevents the potential from being realized. Dharmakīrti wrote extensively on the topic of drawing inferences about absences, and especially about the absence of potentials.<sup>3</sup> This issue is especially critical for Dharmakīrti, since he defines ultimate truth in terms of a capacity to produce an expected effect (*arthakriyāsamārtha*). A thing that genuinely exists, he says, has the potential to produce an effect. A genuine fire has the potential to provide warmth, while the mere idea of fire or the concept of fire, lacks that

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3. There is a good overview of this problem in Brendan S. Gillon, "Negative Facts in Classical Indian Philosophy," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward C. Craig (New York and London: Routledge, 1998). See also Shoryu Katsura, "Dignāga and Dharmakīrti on *Adarśanamātra* and *Anupalabdhi*," *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 46, no. 1 (1992): 222–31.

potential. But what if that potential has not been realized, or what if it is not tested? Consider, for example, a situation in which one sees what looks like a fire burning in the distance, but the opportunity does not arise to get close enough to the apparent fire to see whether it is giving off heat. Is that a genuine fire or not? Or perhaps more to the point, is there any reliable way of *knowing* whether or not it is a genuine fire?

All these epistemological issues we have looked at so far should be borne in mind as we turn to the key question for today.

### 3. What makes awakening possible?

Before tackling this question, it may be worth noting that the question presupposes that awakening is possible and that something makes it so. This presupposition has not gone unchallenged. The issue is explored in some detail in a book by Roger Jackson; the body of the book is the translation of a text by Dharmakīrti, but Jackson's introduction explores the issue in a non-polemical way.<sup>4</sup> Some Buddhists who work in the field of psychotherapy have accepted the therapeutic axiom that the therapeutic process is never finished and that at the very most a person can reduce the root causes of suffering but not eliminate them entirely as is supposed to happen in attaining nirvana. I think it may be worthwhile to explore the presupposition on which this question rests, but for the time being I propose to set that inquiry aside and to look at ways to approach the question itself.

#### 3.1. Some epistemological considerations

Since we have been discussing epistemology and it is fresh in our minds, let us begin with that. There is a formula that occurs in various forms in the Pali canon of the Theravāda tradition. In the Saṃutta-nikāya, for example, the following description is given of a disciple who has followed the Buddhist path to its natural end:

Seeing thus, the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with the body, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is fully released. With full release, there is the knowledge, "Fully released." He discerns that "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world."<sup>5</sup>

Standard accounts of the Buddha in the Pali canon record him as saying about his awakening something very similar to the passage just cited:

With release, there was the knowledge, "Released." I discerned that "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world."

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4. Roger R. Jackson, *Is Enlightenment Possible? Dharmakīrti and Rgyal Tshab Rje on Knowledge, Rebirth, No-Self and Liberation*, Textual Studies and Translations in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1993).

5. This translation appears on <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/buddha.html>.

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What these two passages are claiming is that one can know that there will be no further rebirths, because one knows that the potential for further rebirths has been permanently destroyed. It is not just that one is having a “nirvana moment,” but rather one can be certain that the conditions that are necessary for future birth no longer exist. This is a remarkable claim. It invites the question: how can one be sure that the conditions necessary for rebirth have been completely eradicated and are not simply lying dormant somewhere?

There is a narrative in the Pali canon that shows that it is possible to be mistaken about whether all the afflictive conditions that lead to further rebirth have been fully eradicated. This is the story of the monk Channa.<sup>6</sup> In this narrative Channa is portrayed as a monk who has a serious and very painful illness. He has sought help from all the physicians in his vicinity, and none of them has been able to cure his illness. The medical consensus is that his condition is a terminal illness. Knowing that he will die of this disease eventually but will have to suffer great discomfort before he dies, he makes the decision to end his own life. Before doing so, he consults with Sāriputta, who asks him about his mental condition. Specifically, Sāriputta seeks to learn whether Channa is planning to commit suicide so that he can attain a more comfortable birth elsewhere. Channa responds in the formula that is frequently used by arhants. He says that he has no desire at all for future rebirth. This is taken by Sāriputta as a sign that Channa knows that he is an arhant who knows that “Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.” In verses that he wrote upon his nirvana, Sāriputta wrote:

I have served my teacher; I have followed the Buddha's teachings. My heavy burden has been put down. That which leads to continued existence has been rooted out. I do not long for death. I do not long for life. I shall lay down this body attentively and mindfully. I do not long for death. I do not long for life. I just await my time, as a servant awaits his wages.

On determining that Channa knows that he has rooted out all the afflictive conditions necessary for future rebirth, Sāriputta remains silent. He neither gives permission to Channa to end his life, nor does he forbid it. Taking Sāriputta's silence as approval of his decision, Channa uses his razor to cut his own jugular vein. At this point the story takes a very dramatic turn. As his life force rapidly diminishes, Channa feels a moment of panic at the knowledge that he is dying. He also realizes that this panic is an indication that he is *not* an arhant as he had first believed. He still craves life! Knowing that he has only moments to live, Channa gathers his full resources and concentrates his mind fully. In precisely the moment his life ends, he loses all fear of death and craving for life. When the Buddha is later asked what happened to Channa after he departed this life, the Buddha declares that Channa became an arhant in the very last moment of his life and so was not again reborn.

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6. This episode has been discussed by Martin G. Wiltshire, “The ‘Suicide’ Problem in the Pali Canon,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 6, no. 2 (1983): 124–40.. A response to Wiltshire is found in an article by Damien Keown, “Buddhism and Suicide: The Case of Channa,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 3 (1996): 8–31.

The story of Channa is used to illustrate that it is never too late to practice and to attain nirvana! As long as there is life there is opportunity to become fully indifferent to it and to reach the state of not caring whether one lives or dies. But the story also raises a very sobering fact: it is always possible to be mistaken about whether one has really fully eradicated all the conditions for further unhappiness. The mere fact that one does not now feel fear about dying is no guarantee that such fear will never arise again. What this suggests is that while knowledge that one has reached the goal of Buddhist practice is stated as an ideal—indeed, it is part of the definition of an arhant that he or she *knows* that the goal of being an arhant has been reached—, it is in practice difficult, perhaps even impossible, to realize that ideal.

### 3.2. Some metaphysical considerations

Let us begin with the obvious. If anyone has ever become a buddha, an awakened being, then there must have been a potential for awakening to occur. If we look at that potential in the way that Indian Buddhists would approach it, we would naturally ask: what is the nature of that potential, and where does it reside?

The second of these two questions is easier to answer, so let us begin with it. The Theravāda tradition makes a distinction between three kinds of being who have attained *nirvāṇa*,<sup>7</sup> the elimination of the afflictions (*kilesa*, *kleśa*,<sup>8</sup>) that are the conditions for the arising of unhappiness (*dukkha*, *duḥkha*). Someone who has eliminated the afflictive conditions from his or her mental continuum (*cittasamṭāna*) is called an *arahān* (*arhant*). The Buddha is said to be an *arahān*, but differs from other *arahān* in that he discovered for himself the way to eliminate the afflictive conditions and then followed that way, whereas all other *arahān* follow the way that has been pointed out to them by the Buddha.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of the ordinary *arahān*, the potential for awakening can be said to be placed partly within the sentient being who eventually becomes awakened and partly in external factors that help the awakening take place. Traditionally, the most important of these external factors is the teaching (*sāsana*, *śāsana*) of the Buddha and the institutional structures that facilitate the transmission of the teaching from one generation to the next. While the teachings of the Buddha may be a necessary condition, it is clearly not a sufficient condition, as is suggested by a famous pair of verses in chapter 5 of the Dhammapada:

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7. The Pali word is *nibbāna*.

8. In citing words used by the Theravāda tradition, I shall first give the Pali word used by that tradition and then the Sanskrit words used by most other Indian traditions. When the Pali and the Sanskrit terms are the same, of course, only one word will be cited.

9. Theravāda and other Buddhist traditions distinguish also between two kinds of buddha: those who teach and those who do not. The former kind is called *sammāsambuddha* (*samyaksambuddha*), and the latter is called *paccekabuddha* (*pratyekabuddha*). That distinction is not relevant to our discussion here.

64. Though all his life a fool associates with a wise man, he no more comprehends the Truth than a spoon tastes the flavor of the soup.

65. Though only for a moment a discerning person associates with a wise man, quickly he comprehends the Truth, just as the tongue tastes the flavor of the soup.<sup>10</sup>

What these verses suggest is that there must be something within a person that responds to the teachings of the Buddha and the examples of the wise and accomplished. But what is that something?

One answer to this question was given in some literature from the Mahāyāna tradition. In all the new literature produced in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, some is devotional in nature, some is strictly polemical, while some is more philosophically oriented. The Āryasaddharmalaṅkāvatāra Mahāyāna Sūtra (Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra about the Introduction of the True Dharma to Laṅka) is among these more philosophical sūtras. It is one of the principal scriptural sources for the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Laṅkāvatāra is also one of the principal sources for the vegetarian ethic. Among the most important recurrent themes in this sūtra are

- that the entire world is mind only;
- that there is no dualism, since there is no difference between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, or between presence and absence, or between pure and impure, or between subject and object;
- the notion of different Buddhist paths or vehicles is an illusion;
- that nothing has a nature of its own (*svabhāva*).

The text also teaches that every sentient being has an innate capacity to become awakened. This capacity is poetically called the embryonic buddha or *tathāgatagarbha*. According to the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, all beings have the potential, but the essence of *tathāgatagarbha* is realized only when one casts aside discriminating, dualistic forms of thought. The term “*tathāgatagarbha*” is said to be synonymous with “*dharmakāya*”, that is, the totality of phenomena. On a personal level, it is synonymous with “*buddhatā*” (buddhahood or buddha nature), which in turn is another name for the *ālayavijñāna*, the receptacle of all past experiences and the storehouse of potentials of all future experiences; since it contains the potential for all future experiences, it contains the potential for being a Buddha. The text raises the question, if the notion that there are many paths within Buddhism is an illusion, why do there even appear to be many paths? The answer provided is that the infinite compassion of the Buddha ingeniously contrives methods (*upāya*) of reaching the hearts of all sentient beings and therefore speaks to them in the delusive terms they can comprehend. Eventually, however, he leads them out of delusion and out of discriminating, dualistic thought into a direct experience of the essential nature of the mind, which is pure, calm and non-dualistic.

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10. <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.05.budd.html>

If the message of the Laṅkāvatāra is fully unpacked, it is saying that a person's potential to become awakened is the *dharmakāya*, which is really saying that the potential for awakening is nothing less than everything that is experienced. The entire universe is filled with this potential for the awakening of every sentient being in the universe. This teaching is no doubt the basis of the doctrine, found in much of East Asian Buddhism, that every being is inherently enlightened from the very beginning. Like Aristotle's God, which is pure actuality with no potentiality at all, the *buddhatā* of some East Asian Buddhists is actual awakening that is constantly taking place. There are no potentials for awakening for the simple reason that everything is everywhere at all times fully participating in awakening, which is the very nature of all that exists.

The somewhat misleading name for this doctrine is "sudden enlightenment." The Sanskrit word that is being translated as "sudden" is "yugapad," which might more accurately be translated as "simultaneous." The idea is that everything is simultaneously awakened at every moment. The *locus classicus* for this doctrine is the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra that we have been discussing. While the doctrine is explained in philosophical detail throughout the text, it is summarized very nicely in the story with which the sūtra opens. A paraphrase of that story is as follows:

The opening passage makes the claim that it is the text of a talk on the Dharma that was delivered by the Buddha for the benefit of Rāvaṇa, king of the terrifying and hideous demons known as Rākṣasas. The purpose of the Dharma talk is described as that of helping Rāvaṇa understand that the self is not to be found in any of the dharmas and that no dharmas have permanent natures of their own.

In order to help make this point, the Buddha begins his talk by creating a magical illusion of a continent filled with mountains and cities and people. Having dazzled the demons and their divine attendants with this display, the Buddha makes it vanish as quickly as it was created. He then explains that all dharmas are like this magical illusion. All dharmas are created by the bewildered and frightened mind and have no reality independent of the mind. To perceive these dharmas (such as colors, sounds, tastes, smells, feelings and ideas) is not to perceive the Buddha. To perceive the Buddha is to see the mind in its original purity, unobscured by phenomena.

On witnessing this conjuring trick, the demon king Rāvaṇa experiences a dramatic literally a turning of the mind (*cittaparāvṛtti*), that is, a loss of interest in the phenomenal world, since he understood that the phenomenal world was nothing but the creation of his own previously deluded mind.

As a result of this radical change of mentality, the demon king becomes a great practitioner of meditation, as a result of which he 1) comes to see things as they really are, 2) becomes completely self-sufficient and no longer dependent on others for knowledge or emotional support, and 3) abandons all speculative thinking.

The Buddha then explains to Rāvaṇa that those who have experienced the same sort of turning of the mind that Rāvaṇa has experienced have freed themselves not only

from false teachings but from all teachings. They no longer require teachings, since they can see things as they really are on their own. Seeing things as they really are, they do not make false theories and hypotheses. Not making false theories, they do not need true theories to correct the false. Not relying in any way on true teachings, they make no discriminations between true and false. And not making any discriminations between true and false, they are entirely liberated.

### 3.3. Some practical considerations

In Buddhist literature we can discern two ways of looking at the question of what makes awakening possible. One way is to suppose that sentient beings have no potential for awakening because their essential nature is that they are already awakened. There is no obstacle to awakening as such; there is, however, an obstacle to knowing that awakening is the nature of all things, and that obstacle is a fascination with the world of experiences in which one sees oneself at the center of everything that is being experienced.

Another way of viewing this question is that awakening is something for which sentient beings may or may not have a potential. As is the case with all unrealized potentials, there is no certainty as to whether a sentient being has a potential that is not yet actualized because of some hindrance or has no potential at all.

Here are two ways of looking at the question, and now it is tempting to ask which of these two views is the better one. I suggest approaching this question with the Pragmatist philosopher William James as a guide. In his sixth lecture on Pragmatism, delivered in Boston in 1906, James articulates what he calls the “usual question” of the Pragmatist:

Grant an idea or belief to be true, ... what concrete difference will its being true make in any one's actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash value in experiential terms?<sup>11</sup>

Approached with this question in mind, it looks as though the two ways of thinking about the potential would not lead to any substantial concrete differences. No matter whether one sees a fascination with the phenomenal world as an obstacle that is blocking awakening or as an obstacle that is blocking one's knowing that awakening is already the essential of all things, the practical project is the same. The task is to become disenchanted with the phenomenal world and with oneself as the central observer of the phenomenal world. William James would probably conclude that the centuries-long debate over sudden and gradual enlightenment is a logomachy—a war of words, with nothing concrete hanging on the outcome of the war. I would therefore be inclined to dismiss the debate as one of no real importance.

There does, however, remain a question that *could* have practical consequences. There remains the question of whether awakening is possible at all. Was there ever actually anyone who attained the complete elimination of all afflictive conditions that produce unhappiness?

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11. William James, *Pragmatism* (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), 92.

Is it really possible for anyone to attain nirvana? If one answers that question in the negative, then one is unlikely to engage in Buddhist practice. If one answers in the affirmative, the one is more likely at least to make an effort to engage in Buddhist practice. But what would someone do who really could not arrive at an answer to the question? What if one concludes, following the reasoning Dharmakīrti or following the implications of the story of poor Channa, that there is no way of knowing such things for sure? Here again, I think one can draw inspiration from William James. He offers the following thought experiment:

Suppose that the world's author put the case to you before creation, saying: "I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own 'level best. I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?"<sup>12</sup>

To demand a guarantee of success before acting, says James, is in effect to opt to do nothing. And doing nothing is simply not an option.

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12. William James, *Pragmatism*, 130.