CHAPTER IV

PRAJNA AND THE ZEN APPROACH TO TEXTS

4.1   INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented the Zen perspective of how subjectivity prevents us from processing sensory perceptions in ways that are appropriate for the reality ("the momentary now") of the situation. It was explained that the arising of ego-consciousness during the cognitive process sets off a concatenation of psycho-physical-mental impulses (craving, *upadana*, and *prapanca*) which effectively "hegemonise" the mind's reasoning power, causing it to re-create concepts of reality that satisfy the ego's cravings. Also discussed were the measures proposed in Zen teachings to change cognitive habits—and ultimately the whole cognitive system— by bringing the illusion-destroying power of *prajna* into play, and enabling the non-discriminating, non-rationalising and non-conceptualising knowing of wisdom.

This chapter explores how this *upadana*-versus-*prajna* schema applies in situations where the mind is responding, not to physical sense-objects, but to mental objects (i.e. words and other people's discourses). In the process, the two issues raised at the end of the previous chapter are addressed; namely, the epistemological basis for the assumption implicit in the existence of *sutras* that intersubjective understanding through the reading of texts is possible; and why *sutras* should be read when they do not contain, but only point the way to, ultimate truth.

Following this introduction (4.1) the chapter is divided into five sections. Section 4.2 analyses the opening narrative of the *Lankavatara sutra* (henceforth "*Lankavatara*"). The analysis establishes that in Zen, the root problematic of faulty understanding is identified as the adherence to the subject-object polarity, irrespective of whether the object of understanding is a text or the phenomenal world. Section 4.3 presents an epistemological

theory explaining why and how it is possible to understand and influence others through language and discourse, and discusses the implications of this epistemological theory for the Zen approach to texts. Section 4.4 discusses the role played by the *sutras* in linking the Zen approach to texts to the development of *prajna*. Section 4.5 presents the main critical concepts and tools in the Zen approach to texts that will be borrowed and adapted for use in the Zen-based Reading Procedure. Section 4.6 summarises the chapter.

4.2   A ZEN PERSPECTIVE OF THE ACT OF READING

While contemporary scholars of Buddhism have written on Zen phenomenology, theory of meaning, hermeneutics, aesthetics, and meditation, there is no modern attempt to draw them together in a study explicating the Zen perspective of how the mind processes, visualises, and interprets oral or textual data.[1] In other words, there is no modern study comparable to western theorisation of reader response such as Wolfgang Iser's *The act of reading* (1980). However, the opening chapter of D.T. Suzuki's translation of the full version of the *Lankavatara* (1978)[2] is a narrative of how Ravana[3], the Lord of Lanka, responds to the Buddha's teachings. The narrative gives an insight into the Zen perspective of the reading experience. My intention here is to use my analysis of this narrative as the departure point for a discussion of the Zen approach to texts. In the following analysis, page numbers (in brackets) refer to the 1978 Prajna Press edition of Suzuki's translation of the full version.

In the narrative, Ravana, the Lord of Lanka, invites the Buddha to his country to give a sermon. After the sermon, the Buddha and his retinue "vanished away in the air" (8). Ravana reflects on this strange occurrence, is "immediately awakened", realises that "the world is nothing but his own mind" and goes on to become a "great Yogin of the discipline", disposing of "every argument of the philosophers on causation", and abiding "in the Buddha-knowledge" (9-10). But one day a voice tells him that his Buddha-knowledge needs to be "further purified". Ravana requests, and is granted, a second session with the Buddha, during which he is taught that he cannot reach enlightenment until he has freed his mind from the constraints of the subject-object polarity. The *sutra* proper then begins.

The story can be structurally analysed to correspond to the three stages of *prajna* development, with some kind of insight at the end of each stage. Corresponding to the first stage or the reading of *sutras* is Ravana's hearing of the Buddha's sermon up to the point where he awakens to the idea that "the world is nothing but his own mind". Corresponding

to the second stage, which consists in "well-reasoned appraisal of what one has learned from one's study of the scriptures" (Lindtner 1987: 269), is Ravana's period of studying the discipline of the Yogins and the philosophers up to the time he hears a voice (which I interpret as the voice of his intuitive insight) telling him he has to be "further purified". Corresponding to the third stage or meditation is Ravana's second encounter with the Buddha, which is a question-and-answer session[4] analogous to the analytical thinking required in insight-meditation (*vipasyana*)[5].

With the design of the Zen-based Reading Procedure in mind, I shall approach the narrative as a discourse on two kinds of reading experience separated by a period of reflection and research. The first kind of reading experience, which I describe as "cursory", corresponds to the first hearing ("reading") by Ravana ("the reader") of the sermon ("the text") given by the Buddha (the "author"). The second kind of reading, which I describe as "in-depth", corresponds to Ravana's second encounter and dialogue with the Buddha. In this discussion, I focus on what the story's narrative devices draw my attention to: the correlation of reading intention, reader response and reading outcome; the critique of subjectivity and the imagination; and the relationship between the reader and the text. Then, to give an idea of where Zen might stand in the world of contemporary reader response theory, I briefly compare the Zen perspective on subjectivity and the imagination with the perspectives of W. Iser's aesthetic response theory and D. Bleich's subjective reader response theory.

4.2.1   Correlation of reading intention, reader response and reading outcome

The correlation of reading intention, reader response and reading outcome is inferred from the differences in the depiction of Ravana's first and second hearings of the Buddha's sermons. Prior to the first sermon, the portrayal of Ravana evokes (for me, the reader of the *sutra*) the image of a self-important leader of a small country lionising a world-famous speaker or writer. His motive in inviting the Buddha is to while away some time: "for this long night he [i.e. the Buddha] would probably profit, do good, and gladden the gods as well as human beings" (4). When inviting and welcoming the Buddha, he expresses the desire to be shown "the way leading to the Truth" (5), but makes it clear he is not a first-time hearer: "I recollect the Buddhas of the past…." (6) Throughout these preliminary formalities, he does all the talking while the Buddha remains silent. As if (from my perspective) put off by the Buddha's silence, but determined to hold on to his dignity, he decides even before the

sermon begins that he will not participate in any discussion with the Buddha. Instead, he assigns the task to the Buddha's disciple, whom he praises as "the best speaker" (7).

What happens during the sermon is seen from Ravana's point of view, giving an insight into the Zen perspective of reader response. No details are given of the sermon, which suggests that because of Ravana's lack of "serious" intention, the intellectual content of the sermon does not register with him. Instead, as if reflecting his intention of having something to do to fill "this long night", he gets, as it were, a "magic show"[6]. What he hears is the Buddha delivering "a complete *sutra* with an exquisite voice varied in hundreds of thousands of ways". What he sees is that the Buddha "created" mountains that are replicas of the one on which the discourse is held, but "jewel-adorned" and "magnificently embellished". On the summit of each mountain he sees himself, Lanka, "all the countries" and their leaders, the Buddha, and the disciple asking questions: "Here also was the King of the Rakshasas and the residents of Lanka, and the Lanka created by the Buddha rivalling [the real one]" (8). One notes here the "geo-political" implications of this scene created in his mind.

The reading outcome is what Ravana concludes when the sermon is over and the Buddha and his retinue have vanished. Left alone "in his mansion", Ravana wonders if it has all been a "dream", a "vision", or "a castle conjured up by the Gandharvas[7]" (8), and he reaches the conclusion that "the world is nothing but the mind". The text calls this an "awakening" because he now appreciates the phenomenological nature of perception. But as the rest of the story shows, it is not a full awakening.

Ravana's second encounter with the Buddha is marked by a serious intention on his part. He has been through a period of learning from other people, and in a moment of deeper insight hears a voice telling him that "Buddha-knowledge" is to be known "by oneself" (10).[8] When he makes the request to see the Buddha again, he is earnestly seeking enlightenment, and the Buddha, recognising that Ravana is ready for the next stage of his quest (12), appears before him. Interestingly, what Ravana sees is basically the same as before, a "magic show" replicating with embellishments the present moment: splendid mountains on each of which are himself, the Buddha, his disciples discussing the teachings. This time, however, the audience is made up of celestial beings, and the magic show is awe-inspiring because the Buddha appears with rays of light emitting from every part of his body and "from every pore of the skin". But the Buddha is amused; he laughs "loudly and most

vigorously like the lion-king" (13). A dialogue ensues between Ravana and the Buddha, during which Ravana is told where he has erred and how he should proceed on the path to enlightenment.

I infer from the differences in the two encounters that the narrative is teaching the doctrine of *karma* (actions with intention[9]), which is the application of the doctrine of dependent-origination to human actions. Ravana's enlightening dialogue with the Buddha is the result of his intention to be enlightened.[10] The problem I have is why Ravana sees more or less the same vision the second time, only this time the Buddha appears more splendid. Am I, the reader of the *sutra*, to infer that this second, awe-inspiring vision is the Buddha in his true nature? Not so. As the ensuing dialogue shows, the vision is a prelude to a critique of subjectivity and the imagination.

4.2.2   Critique of subjectivity and the imagination

When asked by his disciple why he laughs, the Buddha advises Ravana not to be "attached to the letter" or "take delight in verbal teachings". The key words are "attached" and "take delight". As discussed in the previous chapter, it is not the fact that we use language that is problematic; it is that we tend to let our attachment to our psycho-linguistically constructed concepts dictate how we perceive and speak of ourselves and the world. But here, an indirect connection is made between language and the imagination (or image-building faculty) as the "maker of meaning" from words, discourses and texts; for Ravana is told that in order to reach enlightenment he must go beyond the imagination (15):

> Thou shouldst … establish thyself at a stage of discipline by planning out such a plan as shall include [all kinds of] skilful means, so that thou comest to realise that realm which is beyond imagination.

In Buddhism, there can be no "imageless thoughts" (Jayasuriya 1976: 47); therefore the realm beyond imagination must be the realm beyond words and concepts, the realm of insight or *prajna*, described by Chen-Chi Chang (see Ch III, 3.4.2) as "the absolute dead-end state where we have nothing to grasp, cling to, or escape from". I infer from this that in the Zen approach to texts, the reader is required to go beyond the image-building of the first, cursory reading to a second, in-depth reading, which involves the kind of analysis ("skilful means") required in insight-meditation.

In the dialogue that follows, Ravana asks the Buddha why Buddhas in the past have always taught that one should abandon "duality". When asked what he understands by "duality" (16), Ravana answers that it has to do with the duality of the "real" and the "unreal" (or imaginary). He is puzzled because if, as Buddhas teach, there is neither real nor unreal, what is the duality that has to be abandoned? (17). It is then explained to him that the "duality" Buddhas speak of is the discrimination that comes from having a viewpoint, which means, in Zen terms, a viewpoint based on the subject-object polarity, the "fiction" constructed by the perceiver's subjectivity. As long as this polarity is in operation, the perceiver will fail to cognise that all he/she perceives as real is in fact "like an image magically transformed" by his/her psycho-linguistic response to the world. This non-cognition causes the perceiver to discriminate and divide things into "real" and "unreal"; and when he/she clings to concepts of "real" and "unreal", all his/her perceptions of reality will be "like seeing one's own image reflected in the mirror, or one's own shadow in the water, or in the moonlight, or seeing one's shadow in the house, or hearing an echo in the valley". Therefore even the duality of "discrimination and non-discrimination must be transcended" (20).

I conclude from this that subjectivity is the reason that on both occasions, Ravana's visions are an embellished replication of his present situation. The difference in the appearance of the Buddha on each occasion may be interpreted as the product of Ravana's imagination, which is formed dependent on how he perceives himself in relation to the Buddha. The first time, the Buddha appears to him as a "normal" human being because he, Ravana, is conscious of his worldly (or geo-political) importance as Lord of Lanka. The second time, the Buddha appears to him as a being with miraculous power surrounded by celestial beings because he is conscious of himself as someone seeking guidance from the Buddha. The appropriative (or *upadani*c) nature of Ravana's imagined response to the "text" is made clear when the Buddha tells Ravana that the knowledge he seeks is not an external object to be appropriated, but his own innate buddhic wisdom, which he has to real-ise or make manifest in himself through meditation and the attainment of a non-dualistic state of mind (21): "By tranquillity is meant oneness (*ekagra*), and oneness gives birth to the highest Samadhi [i.e. the state of non-duality or even-mindedness], which is gained by entering into the womb of Tathagatahood [i.e. Buddhahood], which is the realm of noble wisdom realised in one's inmost self."

4.2.3   Relationship between reader and text

The appropriative nature of the reader's response to texts is communicated in the description of the Buddha speaking in an "exquisite voice varied in hundreds of thousand of ways" at Ravana's hearing of the first sermon. The description can be interpreted literally to mean that each of the multiple Buddhas he sees in his mind teaches in his own way to his own audience. Alternatively, it can be interpreted metaphorically to mean that the one Buddha taught in such a skilful way that each individual in the audience hears the sermon as if he were personally addressed; which is to say, the message reaches each one according to his level of understanding and receptivity. However, if one resists the desire to interpret, and simply considers the voice as "what the hearer hears", one would read in this description a remarkably keen observation of the reading experience. The reader, even when he/she reads "silently", hears his/her own voice and never the author's; a thousand readers hear a thousand different voices—their own. By this involuntary mental action the reader assumes the role of story teller. As he "hears" himself "speaking" the author's words, he projects on to them meanings and images that can come only from his own world of experience. Thus, all the images that come to Ravana's mind are of people and places he already knows or has read about. The reader is the creator of these imaginary worlds in which, if he identifies with the characters, he is also an actor. But because he is aware of himself as the reader, he has the impression that it is the author (e.g. the Buddha) who is creating them for him.[11] When he closes the book (i.e. when the sermon ends) and the fictional/imaginary worlds disappear, he feels as if he had been "drawn" into the writer's illusion. But in fact he has appropriated the author's words, and used them to create his own illusion and text. One could say that the reader has become the author of his own text.

The idea that the reader imaginatively appropriates the writer's words to create his own text based on his own experiences is underscored by the description of the interaction between Ravana and the Buddha during the first encounter. A notable aspect of the narrative is the account of the elaborate length Ravana goes to in order to secure the Buddha's presence in Lanka; this, despite the fact that it is stated from the outset that the Buddha had a prior intention to visit Lanka. We are told that Ravana visits the Buddha several times to invite him, and eventually brings him to Lanka in his own chariot. Through all this, as has been mentioned, the Buddha is silent, and Ravana addresses him as "Muni", the Silent One (5). Read as doctrine, this is probably a metaphoric way of saying that as long as one's ego-consciousness dominates the mind, one's innate buddhic wisdom remains silent. Read as a

reader-response discourse, the image of the Buddha silently getting into Ravana's chariot is that of a willing but a helpless, silenced author completely dominated by the reader's will. Whether or not the author of the Ravana story intended it, one is made aware that to read is to take an author into one's world; that the author has no control over how one interprets his text; and that it is the author-in-the-form-of-his-text that is "captive", not the reader.[12] But there is a paradox. In appropriating the author's text, the reader is himself appropriated; not by the author's text, but by his own version of the text, as Ravana is made to understand at his second encounter with the Buddha (see 4.2.2). Here we may recall a similar point made by Nanananda in his description of how the creator of *prapanca* is overcome by his own creation (see Ch. III, 3.3.3).

Summarising this examination of the Ravana story as a Zen perspective of the act of reading, it is noted that in Zen, there is essentially no difference between the problematics of understanding texts and understanding the nature of the phenomenal world. The root cause of faulty understanding is subjectivity and its concomitants: the adherence to the subject-object polarity, the tendency to split the world into dichotomies, and the propensity to cling to words and teachings as if they stand for permanent objects and eternal truths. There are however two new points of interest. First, there are two kinds or levels of reading—cursory and in-depth—and the reading intention in each case determines the reading response as well as the reading outcome. Second, two kinds of mental faculties are involved in the reading experience—the imagination and the critical faculty—and in in-depth reading, the use of the critical faculty is prioritised.

4.2.4   Zen in relation to two western reader response theories

The Zen critique of subjectivity (or the adherence to the subject-object polarity and the dualistic viewpoint) and imagination (4.2.2) runs counter to most approaches to reading. In contemporary praxis, literary criticism nearly always assumes the reader-text polarity[13] and proceeds by analysing and judging the text in terms of some form of "real"-"unreal" binary: empirical world versus fictional world, true-to-life versus fantastical, believable versus unbelievable and so on. An attempt to compare the Zen approach to texts with Iser's aesthetic response and Bleich's subjective reader response theories would involve an examination of the different epistemological foundations of these western theories, and such a task lies outside the scope of the present study. However, some superficial similarities and

differences can be highlighted for the purpose of providing a frame of reference for the Zen approach.

First, aesthetic response theory: In contrast to the Zen assertion that it is the critical faculty (functional *prajna*) rather than the imagination that will "loosen" the reader's adherence to the subject-object polarity and enable the understanding of texts, Iser (1980: 140) states that it is the reader's "image-building" that "eliminates the subject-object division essential for all perception" and enables the reader to constitute "the meaning of the text" (*ibid*: 141). Of particular interest is the agreement on the one hand that the elimination of the subject-object polarity is necessary for understanding, and on the other hand the divergence as to the means: imagination versus the critical faculty. It should be noted, however, that Iser is writing about aesthetic response to literary fiction where the reading objective is the constitution of a text's "meaning", whereas in the *Lankavatara*, the issue is the critical analysis of pedagogical fiction created for the purpose of guiding the reader to the knowledge that ultimately all concepts are "empty" of determinate meaning.

Next, subjective reader response theory: David Bleich's subjective reader response theory is based on an epistemology similar to Zen's cognitive theory discussed in the previous chapter (3.3). In "Epistemological assumptions in the study of response" (1978: 97-133, reprinted in Tompkins, ed. 1980: 134), Bleich states:

> Generally, response is a peremptory perceptual act that translates a sensory experience into consciousness. The sensory experience has become part of the sense of self, and in this way, we have identified it. Identification always takes place automatically and may thus often be erroneous.

The difference between Bleich's position and the Zen position vis-à-vis this theory of cognition is that Bleich accepts subjectivity as an inexorable "given". In his view all reader response is subjective, and since "knowledge is no longer conceived as objective", he advocates the "development of subjective knowledge" (*ibid*: 159) in educational institutions. In Zen, on the other hand, it is held that people can be guided by the *sutras* to the overcoming of subjectivity and the attainment of wisdom. How is the intersubjective influence implicit in this assertion epistemologically explained? For the answer to this question, we have to turn to the writings of the fourth-century philosopher, Vasubandhu[14], of the Yogacara school of thought.

4.3   VASUBANDHU ON INTERSUBJECTIVE INFLUENCE

The intention in this section is to give an overview of the main points in Vasubandhu's theory of the mind or consciousness, focusing on issues relating to how we respond to words, and how intersubjective understanding and influence through discourse are possible.[15] Before proceeding with the overview, I shall define Vasubandhu's philosophical frame of reference and then explain more fully his theory of perception, which was briefly discussed in the previous chapter (3.3.4).

The cognitive model Vasubandhu uses as the basis of his discourses is not the 6-consciousness model of Early Buddhism (Ch. III, 3.3.1), but the 8-consciousness model of the Mahayana (Ch. III, 3.5.3). As has been explained, in the 8-consciousness model, the cognitive system is conceived as having two additional consciousnesses, *manas* (ego-consciousness) and *alayavijnana* (store-consciousness). In this model, *upadana*, the root problematic of subjectivity in Early Buddhism, is no longer conceived as a separate psycho-mental factor dependent for its existence on Craving, which is suggestive of an appetitive response to physical sense-objects. Instead, it is subsumed under the ego-consciousness, which depends for its self-validation on the appropriation of and clinging to the purely imaginary construct of the subject-object polarity.[16] The store-consciousness is conceptualised as a kind of depot holding all our habit- and memory-"seeds", which are the sediments or residual impressions of our past experiences: actions, perceptions and discourses (e.g. psycho-linguistic signs); concepts of the self; and the factors involved in the cycle of existence (e.g. genetic codes).[17] These seeds are then conceptualised as being sent out to the mind-consciousness (i.e. the cognitive system's "central processing unit") to generate *samjna*-perceptions (knowing by thought association) when a sense-consciousness comes into contact with its sense object.

4.3.1   Theory of the transforming, transformable consciousness

Vasubandhu's philosophy rests firmly on the theory of dependent-origination and its concomitants, the momentariness of reality and the "emptiness" of all perceived and conceptualised entities. A theme running through his discourse is that the 8-consciousness model is, like all the Buddha's teachings, only a pedagogical fiction, which cannot be "a real description of that which is fundamentally indeterminate" (Anacker 1984: 62). His approach to the model is what Anacker (*ibid*: 58) calls "categoriaclastic" (from

"iconoclastic"). In *A Discussion of the Five Aggregates* (Anacker, *ibid*: 71), Vasubandhu explains:

> And what is consciousness? It is awareness of an object-of-consciousness; visibles, etc. "Citta" and "manas" are the same as consciousness. They are so designated because of their variety, and because of their providing a mental basis, respectively. Actually, the store consciousness is also a citta, as it accumulates seeds for all motivating dispositions. Its objects-of-consciousness and aspects are undiscerned. It joins an assemblage pertaining to an organism into a felt relationship, and continues as a series of moment-events.

He repeats this idea in the *Vimsatika-karika* (henceforth "*Twenty Verses*"), stating (Anacker, *ibid*: 161): "*Citta*, *manas*, consciousness, and perception are synonymous", where "*citta*" means, according to Anacker (*ibid*: 60), "the basic consciousness-moment". And in the *Trimsika-karika* (henceforth "*Thirty Verses*"), he declares (Anacker, *ibid*: 188):

> "Consciousness is only all the seeds, and transformation takes place in such and such a way, according to a reciprocal influence, by which such and such a type of discrimination may arise."

In understanding Vasubandhu's theories, then, it is important to avoid thinking of the 8 consciousnesses as separate compartments in a static "brain-box". Rather, the whole of consciousness should be visualised as a complex stream of seeds of experience, perception, mental faculties and psychological factors constantly changing and evolving as they condition one another in their moment-to-moment arising and fading away. The fluidity and transformability of consciousness are crucial to Vasubandhu's theory of perception, knowledge generation, intersubjective understanding and, ultimately, enlightenment, when the whole of consciousness becomes a stream of non-discriminating wisdom.

4.3.2   Theory that perception is independent of external objects

Another fundamental aspect of Vasubandhu's philosophy is his theory that perceptions occur or present themselves to consciousness independently of external objects. In the *Twenty Verses*, he problematises the Early Buddhist teaching that cognition occurs when a

sense-consciousness (e.g. sight) makes contact with an external sense-object (e.g. red flower), arguing thus (Anacker, *ibid*: 171):

> When cognition through direct perception arises in the form "This is my direct perception", the object itself is already not seen, since this distinguishing takes place only through a mental consciousness, and the visual consciousness has already ceased by that time, so how can its being a direct perception be accepted? This is especially true for a sense-object, which is momentary, for that visible, or taste, etc. has already ceased by that time.

I touched on this aspect of the theory in the previous chapter (3.3.4), when I stated that his critique of perception is based on his assertion that what the mind perceives is neither the thing-in-itself nor the thing-in-itself in the momentary now. In this discussion, I shall probe a little deeper. If the mind does not perceive the thing-in-itself, what does it perceive? What the eye-consciousness actually perceives are "certain arrangements" (Anacker *ibid*: 132) of the colour red. What is transmitted to the mind-consciousness is the "reflection" or impression of this configuration of colours moments *after* the reality of that particular arrangement, shades and tones of redness first perceived by the eye-consciousness has faded away and been replaced by another moment of reality in all its particularities (see Ch. III, 3.3.4). But in the instant that the mind-consciousness registers the "reflection", its latent store of habit-, memory-, and linguistic-"seeds" of previous experiences (of "redness", configurations of shapes and the word "flower") converge, so to speak, to help consciousness construct the concept "red flower".

What the mind perceives, then, is not an "object out there", but its own construction. To support his theory that perception occurs independently of extra-mental objects, Vasubandhu cites the examples of perceptions resulting from "optical disorder" (Anacker *ibid*, p. 161), dreams and hallucinations. All these perceptions have nothing to do with objects "out there" or experiences arising from contacts between the sense-organs and their corresponding sense-objects. Nevertheless, as far as the mind-consciousness is concerned, they are not less real. As he argues, dreams can, and often do, result in physical reactions during sleep, and hallucinations are real to the person perceiving/experiencing them. In the *Tri-svabhava-nirdesa* ("Treatise on the Three Natures", henceforth "*Three Natures*"), Vasubandhu states that it is because of the mind's not being able to see things-in-themselves in their true nature, that different consciousness streams (or sentient beings)

perceive/experience/are conscious of the same moment in different ways (Anacker, *ibid*: 295-297n).

4.3.3   Theory of the influence of words on the structure of consciousness

According to Vasubandhu, every perception or experience creates new habit- and memory seeds. And since consciousness is nothing but its seeds, the accumulation of seeds consequent on persistent habits of emotional response, thought, speech, and action will eventually change the constitution or structure of the stream of consciousness, which, in Vasubandhu's terms, is the whole cognitive system. In *A Discussion for the Demonstration of Action*, Vasubandhu explains the dynamic (Anacker, *ibid*: 112):

> The retributory consciousness [i.e. the store-consciousness], which is only the various kinds of seeds themselves, is influenced by the other beneficial and unbeneficial events arising together with the consciousnesses different from it, by means of their augmentation of these seeds, according to circumstances. In accordance with the force of this special transformation of the series, the process of impression resumes, and desired and undesired effects are brought about.

In this theory of the transformability of consciousness is the theoretical explanation for the assertion in the Ravana story that subject-object discrimination leads to self-reflexive perceptions. The habit of perceiving things in terms of the self-other polarity will lead to a cognitive system constituted of experience-seeds coloured by the habit of dividing the world into sets of two. These sets of two will always be egocentrically evaluated because the imaginary constructs of "subject", "object", and the subject-object polarity arise in the first place from the desire for self-perpetuation in the face of perceived threats to oneself, and from the desire for permanence in reaction to the perceivable reality of change.[18] Conversely, by faithfully following the three-pronged strategy for cognitive change (Ch. III, 3.3.7), one's consciousness would over time be restructured so that it will be constituted of seeds of thoughts, words and actions influenced by the Six Perfections or *paramitas* (Ch. III, 3.2.2). Alternatively, when, in a moment of *prajna*-insight, one experiences a new perspective or approach to a problem, one's stream of consciousness undergoes a transformation or begins to evolve in a new direction.

It is because the structure of consciousness is transformed by experience that intersubjective understanding and influence through discourse is possible. To illustrate this point, Vasubandhu uses two examples from folklore in verses 3 through 6 of the *Twenty Verses* (Anacker *ibid*: 162-165). The first is the case of *pretas* (spirits suffering as the result of past unbeneficial deeds), who all—"and not just one of them"—"see a river filled with pus … [and] rivers full of urine and feces, guarded by men holding clubs or swords, and other such perceptions"; perceptions that have nothing to do with external reality because non-*pretas* do not see them. The second is the case of those who are in a "hell-state" through "the sovereignty of the common retribution for their individual actions", and who are punished by "hell-guardians, dogs and crows". According to Vasubandhu, these hell-states, like the rivers of pus perceived by the *pretas*, can have no basis in reality. For, logically, if the agents of punishment (hell-guardians, dogs and crows) have not committed the same deeds as those sent to hell to suffer, they should not be in that hell-state in the first place. On the other hand, if they are guilty of the same deeds, then they too would be suffering and should not be meting out punishment to the other inhabitants. Therefore, the hell-state and the sufferings experienced by these "inhabitants of hell" are the constructed or imagined effects of "a transformation of consciousness itself due to (past) actions" (*ibid*: 164).

Here we come to a point that is of interest for the present study. Anticipating his imagined interlocutor's objection to the idea that *pretas* and hell-guardians are products of the imagination, Vasubandhu poses the question as to why "scriptural authority" (*ibid*: 165)—including the Buddha—speaks of cognition as dependent on external objects; and answers the question himself: the teachings are so presented for pedagogical reasons (*ibid*: 165-166). By using the examples from folklore and moving from there to "scriptural authority" and the Buddha's teachings, Vasubandhu establishes his case that individual streams of consciousness are influenced by discourse. That people should talk about *pretas* and hell-states, and under certain conditions (e.g. guilt) even experience them, as if they really existed, is proof that their minds have been structured to do so through the influence of stories they have heard. In other words, common linguistic-, habit-, and memory-"seeds" allow human beings not only to understand one another but also to influence one another's perceptions of reality through discourse (*ibid*: 172): "For all beings there is certainty of perception through a mutual sovereign effect of perceptions on one another, according to circumstances". In the next few verses, Vasubandhu discusses how some people "by the

mental control of psychic powers" cause "mental harm" to others by influencing their perceptions and the structure of their consciousnesses.

Vasubandhu is thus unequivocal about the ability of human beings to influence one another not only through physical actions but also through their thoughts and words. Anacker (*ibid*: 159) explains that this happens through the "double influence of words:

> …what is observed directly are always only perceptions, coloured by particular consciousness-"seeds". The very fact that these "seeds" are *spoken of* at all indicates a *double influence*. On one hand, every consciousness-moment deposits a "seed"; on the other, each "seed" influences every subsequent consciousness-moment…. (Italics mine)

4.3.4 Implications of Vasubandhu's theories for the Zen approach to texts

The implications of Vasubandhu's theories of the transformability of consciousness, the independence of perceptions from external objects, and intersubjective influence of discourse for the Zen approach to texts are quite significant. If consciousness constructs its own realities independently of the thing-in-itself "out there", then despite D. Bleich's claim (in Tompkins 1980: 147) that "a two-year-old" knows the difference between what is "real" and what is "pretend", it is possible that at some deeper level, our consciousness simply cannot tell the difference and is equally influenced by both. It is certainly true that we can be moved to tears and laughter by what we read and hear; the *Surangama Sutra* says as much in its discourse on *samjna* or perception by associative thought (Lu, trans. 1989: 57):

> Ananda, if someone speaks of sour plums, your mouth will water, and if you think of walking above an overhanging cliff, you will have the sensation of shivering in the soles of your feet."

This would explain why in Zen, little distinction is made between the way one responds to the phenomenal world and the way one responds to texts. At the same time, however, it is because of consciousness' openness to verbal influence and transformation that subjectivity can be overcome. For, if words can cause mental torture, they can also be used as guides to enlightenment. If consciousness is structured by habits of thought and

action, its composition can be changed by changing one's habits—as well as one's circle of friends and associates, and what one hears and reads.

Here we arrive at the crucial theoretical problem in the reading of *sutras*. The reader depends on "correct" understanding of the *sutras* to guide him/her to the enlightenment of the Buddhas. It is therefore extremely important that what is perceived as the Buddha's words does not in fact have its origin in the reader's own habit- and memory-seeds; because if it did, reading would be an activity that traps the reader in an ever-shrinking hall of mirrors instead of opening up pathways to enlightenment. How is the subjective reading and understanding of *sutras* to be avoided? In the story of Ravana, he is advised to go beyond the realm of the imagination and emancipate himself from his adherence to the subject-object polarity. How is this achieved?

4.4   FUNCTION OF *SUTRAS* IN DEVELOPMENT OF *PRAJNA*

Modern scholars have noted that the *sutras*—especially the Mahayana *sutras*—frequently include auto-commentaries telling the reader how they should be read. Nathan Katz (1984: 192) has noted, citing Robert Thurman (1978: 22), that in providing "interpretative principles to be applied to his own teachings", the Buddha represents "a very unique case within the history of religions, wherein the founder of the religion is himself aware of exegetical and hermeneutical difficulties regarding his own teaching". The Ravana narrative in the *Lankavatara* is an example of a composition with hermeneutic intent. Another example is the *Catuhpratisaranasutra* or "Four Refuges" (see 4.5.2). Such compositions give guidelines on how to approach the *sutras*, but usually end up emphasising the importance of meditation and *prajna* in reading the *sutras*. In this section, I want to examine why the reading of *sutras* is so important in the development of *prajna*, especially since it is asserted that the *sutras* do not contain, but only use relative truth to point the way to, ultimate truth.

For the purpose of this discussion, I examine the literary devices used in the *sutras* that address some or all of the reading problems identified in the story of Ravana through the act of reading. These devices include "auto-commentaries" (by which I mean passages purporting to be the words of the Buddha talking about himself and his teachings) as well as techniques of narration such the use of metaphors and hyperboles in the depiction of characters and descriptions of scenes and events. Focusing mainly (but not exclusively) on

my reading of two major Mahayana *sutras*—the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* (henceforth "*Prajnaparamitas*") and the *Lankavatara*—I shall show that the auto-commentaries are not always "interpretative principles" in the sense that they stand outside the main narrative, giving guidance on how to approach the other parts of the *sutras* (e.g. the doctrines, or the use of metaphors). Rather, these auto-commentaries are often inextricable from the techniques of narration and the content; and all the different aspects of the *sutras* work together as authorial strategies to activate the reader's *prajna* and get it started on the analytical-critical path to the point where imagination and logic break down and intuitive insight (*prajna*) is experienced at some level. I shall begin with an examination of some auto-commentaries on the purpose of *sutras*.

4.4.1   Auto-commentaries on the purpose of *sutras*

In presenting the two-truth theory in the previous chapter (3.5.4), mention was made of Nagarjuna's statement that because Buddhas have to make use of ordinary language to teach, their teachings are relative truth and not ultimate truth. The teachings are called "truth" because they can be validated by empirical observation and analysis (e.g. the doctrine of dependent-origination), but technically, they are fictions because of their language-mediated and constructed nature. This enforced use of fictions by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is always made clear to the reader of Mahayana *sutras*. On the one hand, the reader is told why Buddhas must teach (*Lankavatara*, Suzuki, trans. 1978: 167):

> If …the truth is not declared (in words) the scriptures containing all truths will disappear, and when the scriptures disappear there will be no Buddhas, *Sravakas* [i.e. hearers/learners], *Pratyekabuddhas* [i.e. those who become enlightened without the help of Buddhas], and Bodhisattvas; and when there is no one (to teach), what is to be taught and to whom?

On the other hand, the reader is repeatedly reminded of the fictional nature of the teachings. In a parable in the *Saddharma-pundarika Sutra* or the "Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law" (Bunno, K. trans. 1980: 85-91)[19], the teachings are compared to the expedient lies told by a father desperate to lure his children out of a burning house. In the *Lankavatara* (Suzuki, *ibid*: 68), the Buddha speaks of his teachings as a mirage:

…the *sutras* are the teaching in conformity with the dispositions of all beings and deviate from the [real] sense, and not the truth-preserving statement. … *[I]t is like unto the mirage which entices the deer with its treacherous springs, the springs are not there but the deer are attached, imagining them to be real*. (Italics mine.)

He also speaks of them as a painting (*ibid*: 43-44):

Like unto a master of a painting or his pupils, who arranges colours to produce a picture, I teach. The picture is not in the colours, nor in the canvas, nor in the plate; *in order to make it attractive to all beings*, is a picture presented in colours. *What one teaches, transgresses*; for the truth (tattva) is beyond words. (Italics mine.)

What is noteworthy about these auto-commentaries is that the teachings are not presented as ultimate truth expediently "fictionalised" because it is necessary to couch them in conventional language. They are presented rather as lies, mirages and paintings—illusions absolutely devoid of truth and reality, and deliberately fabricated to "lure", "entice", and "attract". And their purpose is not for the attainment of wisdom, but to free the reader from the bondage of the mind (Suzuki, *ibid*: 167):

…religious discourses are given by myself and other … Fully-Enlightened Ones in response to varieties of faith on the part of beings, in order to remove them from [the bondage of] the Citta, Manas and Manovijnana, and not for the attainment and establishment of self-realisation which issues from noble wisdom.

As has been explained earlier (4.3.1), *citta*, *manas*, and *manovijnana* are three aspects of consciousness. *Citta* refers to the cognitive system as a whole (Suzuki, *ibid*, p. xxi-xxii) or "the basic consciousness-moment" (Anacker 1984: 60); *manovijnana* is the mind-consciousness, the cognitive system's central processing unit, where percepts are processed into concepts and viewpoints; and *manas* is the ego-consciousness that egocentrically "colours" the concepts and viewpoints and then clings to them in an *upadan*ic way. Freedom from their bondage means not merely the undoing of concepts and views (i.e. mental fictions) but also the eradicating of the mind's propensity to form them. In other words, the *sutras* aim to do the same thing that functional *prajna* is supposed to do: change cognitive habits (see 3.4.2).

However, *sutras* have their limits; they are not for the attainment and establishment of "self-realisation which issues from noble wisdom". "Self-realisation" here should be understood as meaning both the realisation that there is no permanent "self", as well as that this realisation must come from within oneself during meditation, when one "must withdraw from the last ditch of our thought-tracks and surrender with both hands naked, with nothing for them to hold on to, and jump into the unknown abyss of Buddhahood" (Chen-Chi Chang 1957: 336) (see 3.4.2). What this means is that the *sutras* can help one to change one's cognitive habits only to a certain extent; they cannot do what *prajna* does, which is to change the whole cognitive system by infusing it with wisdom. Therefore they are described in the *Lankavatara* as clay-model toys (Suzuki, *ibid*, pp. 47-8):

> As a king or a wealthy householder, giving his children various clay-made models, pleases them and makes them play [with the toys], but later gives them real ones; so, I, making use of various forms and images of things, instruct my sons; but the limit of reality (*bhutakoti*) can [only] be realised within oneself.

This, then, is the purpose of *sutras* in the development of *prajna*. They are toys, used provisionally, strategically, and even playfully, to activate the reader's functional *prajna* so that the mind can take its first baby steps on the analytic-critical path necessary for the perfection of *prajna* and total cognitive change. And they do so by addressing the reading problems identified in my analysis of the Ravana story (4.2) as overdependence on others; thinking of the teachings as objects of knowledge that can be appropriated; interpreting words literally and believing that words correspond to objects that have real and permanent existence; thinking in terms of dualities, e.g. "real" and "unreal", "truth" and "fiction"; and overdependence on the imagination. In the following, I shall show how these reading faults are addressed in the *sutras*, first by the auto-commentaries and then by the techniques of narration.

4.4.2 Auto-commentarial strategies used to correct reading faults and activate functional *prajna*

In general the auto-commentaries are fairly straightforward in addressing reading faults. This is particularly true of auto-commentaries in the *sutras* of the Pali Canon. An example of a statement aimed at deterring the reader from clinging blindly to the "authority" of the Buddha's words as incontrovertible truth is the *Gnanasara Samuccaya* (quoted in Jayasuriya

1976: xvii), which reminds the reader/hearer of the need to test the teachings through personal experience:

> As the wise test gold by burning, cutting and examining by means of a touchstone, so should you accept my words after examining them and not merely out of regard and reverence for me.

Another example from the Pali Canon is the *Alagaddupama Sutta* (quoted in Nanananda 1971: 38), which is aimed at countering the "post-test" tendency to cling to the value of a proven theory. Here, the reader is reminded that once the teachings have served their purpose, they are to be abandoned:

> Even so, monks, is the Parable of the Raft, *Dhamma* [teachings], taught by me for crossing over, not for retaining. You, monks, by understanding the Parable of the Raft, should get rid even of right mental objects, all the more of wrong ones.

In the Mahayana texts, the auto-commentaries are more puzzling. One of the most puzzling is the paradoxical statement attributed to the Buddha, in which he says that he spoke not a word from the night of his enlightenment until his death (see discussion by Lopez in Lopez ed. 1993: 48-49). However, even this statement is explained in a straightforward manner in auto-commentaries in the *Lankavatara*. In one of them (Suzuki 1978: 124-125), the "deeper meaning" of the Buddha's claim to sustained silence is explained with a parable. The Buddha is said to have taught nothing because the ultimate truth is not his truth, but the "eternally-abiding reality"; in the same way that a man who stumbles on an ancient city in the forest cannot claim to have built the road to it or anything in the city, so Buddhas cannot make "any proclamation whatever" about the eternally abiding reality. In another auto-commentary (Suzuki, *ibid*: 167), two explanations are given for the negation of speech on the part of the Buddha. The first is to teach that the "eternally abiding reality" is not an external object that one can acquire, but something one must realise oneself; and therefore has "nothing to do with dualistic terminology". The second is to discourage the literal interpretation of words, not only because words cannot convey ultimate truth, but also because Buddhas have to adapt their teachings to suit their listeners' predispositions and capacity for understanding[20] and therefore deviate from the "straightforward course":

…it is declared in the canonical text by myself and other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that not a letter is uttered or answered by the Tathagatas. For what reason? *Because truths are not dependent on letters*. … [T]he Bodhisattva-Mahasattva is not to become attached to the words of the canonical texts. *… [O]wing to the functioning of the minds of sentient beings, the canonical texts sometimes deviate from their straightforward course*…. (Italics mine)

4.4.3 Techniques of narration used to correct reading faults and activate functional *prajna*

Of greater interest, especially to the student of literature, are the techniques of narration used to correct reading faults and activate functional *prajna*. The best examples of how techniques of narration are used to correct reading faults and activate functional *prajna* are found in the *Prajnaparamitas*. The *Prajnaparamitas* are generally acknowledged by Buddhist scholars to be among the earliest compilation of the Mahayana texts in writing. The whole collection represents the work of Indian Buddhists over a period of more than a millennium, between 100 BCE and 1100 CE (Conze 1953: 117). The *sutras* vary in length, the longest being the *Prajnaparamita in 100,000 Stanzas* and the shortest being the *Prajnaparamita in One Letter* (quoted in full by Lopez in Lopez, ed. 1993: 47).

The longer ones are characterised by what J. K. Nariman (1972: 86) describes as "the senseless customs of embodying constant repetitions", which are "so limitless and excessive that it would be quite possible to strike out more than half of these colossal works". The rest of Nariman's critical comment (*ibid*), first written in 1919, is worth quoting because it gives an idea of the experience of reading the *sutras*:

It is not enough for these writers to say that "everything is only name," but this everything is detailed to exhaustion in interminable series of sentences. It is conceivable that men should entertain the philosophical view that the world is not a reality and that all is negation and that man is unable to express any verdict on any question except in the shape of a negative, but that people should from this standpoint offer universal denial and write book after book and thousands of pages might appear impossible. But this impossibility is materialised in the *Prajnaparamitas*.

Nariman's exasperation is not unjustified. In the introduction to his translation of the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* in 18,000 lines, Edward Conze (1979: 5) remarks, "All the many thousand lines of this *Sutra* can be summed up in two sentences."

We may ask: why is it necessary to construct these lengthy and elaborate works when the message can be conveyed in a sentence or two—or even one letter? Based on my personal experience of reading the *sutras*, I believe it is to break the reader's habit of responding to texts by "taking delight" in words, and, to use W. Iser's words, use "image-building" to constitute "the meaning of the text" (4.2.4); and in this practical intent there is consonance of message and method in the *sutras*. It is not enough that I, the reader of the *sutras*, understand intellectually and conceptually the message of not being attached to words and taking delight in verbal teachings. I have to "real-ise" the message. I have to go through the experience of responding to the words, of observing how words cause me to conjure up all manner of fictional worlds, and of being caught in what Nariman (1972: 69), referring to the *Lotus Sutra*, describes as "an actual intoxication of words with which the reader is deadened, the thought being drowned in the inundation of verbiage".

What Nariman failed perhaps to appreciate is that the reader's being "deadened" by the verbiage is exactly what the *sutras* aim for. As the reader, I have to reach the point where I find my imagination stretched to its utmost by the impossibility and even absurdity of the descriptions of the milliards of Buddhas and Buddha-worlds; the point where, in fact, I simply and totally fall out of love with words. For it is at this point that I begin to see the humour in the whole exercise. To use the words of the *Lankavatara*, I have been "attracted", "enticed" and "lured" to this point where, temporarily cured of my addiction to words and image-making, I get a glimpse, however faint, of the "realm beyond imagination". This is the realm where I finally realise for myself that "belief" and "disbelief", "fiction" and "reality" are only concepts; and that reality "as it is" can be either, neither, or both "real" and "unreal".

But the *Prajnaparamitas* are not done with me yet. If I should choose to avoid the longer *sutras* with their repetitive, descriptive passages, and read the shorter, synopsised ones, such as the *Vajracchedika-prajnaparamita* ("Diamond") *Sutra* or the *Prajnaparamita Hrdaya* ("Heart") *Sutra*, I am confronted with "mind games" in the form of negative statements, contradictions and paradoxes. In the "Heart" *sutra* (Lu K'uan Yu, trans. 1985: 1-2), for example, the basic teachings of the Buddha—the five aggregates, the twelve-link

chain of existence, the four noble truths, and even wisdom—are negated, implying that all the teachings are fictions, exactly as the Buddha himself says. If I take these negations literally, however, I am immediately caught in one of those logical puzzles based on the person who states that everything he says is a lie. If everything he says is a lie, then the statement he has just made must also be a lie, which means that everything he says is the truth. But if everything he says is the truth, then the statement just made must be true, which means that everything he says is a lie. So I find myself lured with a wink and a smile back to the core message in Zen: things are equally real and unreal, equally fiction and truth.

4.4.4   The "reverse" hermeneutics of the Zen approach to texts

The insight gained through reading the *sutras* is the same as that gained through *prajna*—"right understanding"; namely that the ultimate truth of anything is that it is "empty" or indeterminate, and it is only my viewpoint that relativises this truth, making it one or the other (see Ch. III, 3.4.2). I have not thereby attained *nirvana*, but my cognitive habits have been changed. The change is not only that I cannot view the opposition between "truth" and "fiction", "real" and "unreal" in the same way again. It is also that I can no longer think of reading as "interpretation" or the retrieval of meaning. In the process of reading my way to the dead-end point of both imagination and logic, I have "awakened" to the fact that the convention of interpretation is hardly ever about "retrieving" meanings from words. It is nearly always about imputing meanings to words. And being awakened, I am liberated from the need to interpret. This, I believe, is the function of the *sutras* in the development of *prajna*. It is to put into effect the practice of a metafictional system of "reverse hermeneutics"—the arresting of the reader's desire for determinate meaning and permanent closure.[21]

Nagarjuna's defence of his discourse on "Emptiness" (Ch. III, 3.4.2) in the *Vigrahavyavartani* or "Averting of Disputes" (Bhattacharya 1986: 108) provides an author's perspective of the Zen metafictional principle of "reverse hermeneutics". Comparing himself to a creator of artificial beings and a magician, Nagarjuna explains that his discourse on Emptiness is a fiction deliberately created to expose the illusionary nature of everyday fictions created by *upadana* and *prapanca*:

Suppose that a person, artificially created…, should prevent…another artificial person, or that a magic man… should prevent another man created by his own magic … [from doing something]. Of the same nature would be this negation.

Ian W. Mabbett's explanation (1995: 205) of the passage highlights the deconstructive and heuristic import of Nagarjuna's technique:

We may imagine a puppet show in which one puppet tears apart another, revealing it to be just a puppet, not a sentient being…. [On the other hand] an unreal figure (a robot, or a phantom, or a figure seen in a dream) may utter a true statement; similarly, though all things are void, including the utterance of the teaching of voidness, this utterance can serve as the vehicle for truth.

It should be added that in the process of destroying the puppet of our everyday, psycho-linguistically constructed fictions, the puppet of soteriological fictions destroys itself[22], in the same way that the *sutras* and the doctrines must be abandoned once they have served their purpose, and that *prajna* as a critical faculty "self-destructs" once it reaches its objective of having no object and becomes non-discriminating wisdom (Ch. III, 3.42).

4.4.5   Importance of literary fiction in the development of *prajna*

In the Mahayana tradition, the development of *prajna* is closely related not only to the reading of *sutras*, but also to the creation of various types of literary fictions (e.g. *sutras*, *shastras*, parables, fables, stories, and discourses). The ultimate aim of reading these fictions is enlightenment, but the ultimate aim of enlightenment is not *nirvana* (understood here as the cessation of existential suffering) and the abandoning of the world and its fictions. It is rather the "complete conquest" of *nirvana*, which means renouncing *nirvana* and operating in the *samsar*ic (quotidian) world with a pragmatic wisdom that comes from deep insight into the nature of fictions and how to use them to bring an end to conflict[23] (Streng 1982: 96):

The depth of a bodhisattva's insight into the empty nature of things allows him or her to participate in the construction of thoughts, "signs", and objective supports while not being caught by them. The ability to attain "full knowledge" without either destroying or being attached to forms….

It is this need to operate in the world of relative truth while profoundly aware of the nature of ultimate truth that links the reading of *sutras* and the development of *prajna* to Nagarjuna's statement that one cannot attain to ultimate truth and *nirvana* without knowing the difference between relative truth and ultimate truth (see Ch. III, 3. 5.4). For, in Zen, *nirvana* is *samsara* itself experienced with non-discriminating wisdom and freedom from the longing for determinate meaning and permanent closure.

4.4.6   Significance of research findings

The exploration of *prajna* and the Zen approach to texts in this and the previous chapters has shown that Zen philosophy is a complete treatise on fictions—existential fictions as well as literary ones. The discourses on epistemology, phenomena, language, logic, psychology and ethics explain how conceptual fictions are constructed, why they need to be deconstructed, and how they can be deconstructed. The auto-commentaries in the *sutras* and *shastras* are literary-theoretical discourses on the writing and reading of literature. Unlike in the European literary tradition, which is largely concerned with interpretation and the retrieval, constitution, and production of meaning, Zen teaches a system of reverse hermeneutics, which erases meaning by deconstructing the reader's own existential fictions and denies closure by disabling the reader's propensity for creating new fictions through interpretation. For the implementation of this system of reverse-hermeneutics, the discourses provide critical concepts and tools (e.g. reading guidelines and analytic tools and procedures), and demonstrate their application. The significance of these findings is that they give rise to the hypothesis that some of these critical concepts and tools may be borrowed and adapted for the analysis of contemporary literary fiction.

4.5   ZEN CRITICAL CONCEPTS AND TOOLS BORROWED FOR THE ZEN-BASED READING PROCEDURE

In this section I shall briefly discuss the Zen critical concepts and tools that will be borrowed and adapted for the Zen-based Reading Procedure. They are the multiple-reading model, the "Four Reliances" guidelines to reading sutras, Vasubandhu's Three Natures critical procedure, and two analytic tools from Hua Yen philosophy, namely, the Principals and Satellites, and the Ten Time Frames.

4.5.1   Multiple-reading model

In the analysis of the Ravana story it was noted that in the Zen approach to texts, the reading experience is conceived as a "dialectic" between *upadan*ic appropriation and *prajn*ic understanding. There are therefore two kinds or levels of reading. The first is a cursory reading in which the appropriative (*upadan*ic) imagination plays a major role in synthesising the general drift of the text. The second is an in-depth reading involving critical analysis, which serves to correct the subjective misapprehensions of the first reading. This multiple-reading approach to texts will be adopted as the format of the reading strategy in the Zen-based Reading Procedure. However, the Procedure will have a third reading in which inferences derived from the second reading will be validated, bringing the Procedure in line with the practice of using logical proof in the development of *prajna*. The Procedure will therefore have a three-reading strategy based on a synthesise-investigate-validate format, where the reader's perceptions of the text gained at the first reading will be corrected during the second reading, and the inferences drawn from the second reading will be validated in the third reading.

4.5.2   The "Four Refuges" reading guidelines

In order to define the general approach of the Zen-based Reading Procedure, I shall adapt the four reading guidelines in the *Catuhpratisaranasutra* or "Four Refuges". The explanation given here of the *sutra* is based on Sara Boin-Webb's 1985 English translation of Etienne Lamotte's 1947 French translation and exegesis of the *sutra,* published in *Buddhist hermeneutics* (Lopez, ed. 1993: 11-27). The four guidelines are as follows:

> The doctrine (*dharma*) is the refuge and not the person (*purusa*).
> The spirit (*artha*) is the refuge and not the letter (*vyanjana*).
> The *sutra* of precise meaning (*nitartha*) is the refuge, not (the *sutra*) the meaning of which requires interpretation (*neyartha*).
> Direct knowledge (*jnana*) is the refuge and not discursive consciousness (*vijnana*).

The doctrine (*dharma*) is the refuge and not the person (*purusa*)

As Lamotte explains it, this first guideline recommends that when trying to understand the *sutras*, one should rely on one's "personal reasoning (*yukti*)" rather than on another person's authority. Lamotte gives as examples of such authority the Buddha, members of an

established "religious community", and "particularly learned elders". The reason Lamotte gives for not relying on human authority, "however respectable", is that "experience shows that human evidence is contradictory and changeable" (Lopez ed., *ibid*: 12). Here I would add another, epistemology-based, reason. In Buddhism only two means of knowledge are accepted as valid: direct perception (*pratyaksa*) and inference, and inferences must be validated by logical means. There is in Zen a definite preference for knowledge that one has either experienced directly or reasoned out firsthand, critically, and without fear or favour. However, this does not mean that other people's opinions and authority are categorically classed as untrustworthy. In the *Kalama Sutta*, reference is made to "the wise", whose praise and censure can serve as benchmarks of one's evaluation of other people's discourses.[24]

The spirit (*artha*) is the refuge and not the letter (*vyanjana*).

The idea that one should understand the spirit and not the letter of something written is so commonplace that it seems hardly to need explanation. We speak of "the spirit of the law", meaning "the real meaning as opposed to lip-service or verbal expression" (Concise Oxford Dictionary). Lamotte identifies two reading faults mentioned in other *sutras*—memorising verses without comprehension and interpreting words literally—which suggest that the guideline was traditionally understood in the modern sense. Lamotte also provides evidence that the intention of the guideline is not to deny the importance of the letter, but "only to subordinate it to the spirit" (Lopez ed., *ibid*: 14). This principle relates to the theory that language can never adequately express truth; so literal translations are to be avoided.

The *sutra* of precise meaning (*nitartha*) is the refuge, not (the *sutra*) the meaning of which requires interpretation (*neyartha*).

The background to this third guideline is that there are many *sutras* that are either imprecise or indeterminate in meaning, internally paradoxical, or contradictory to others. According to Lamotte (Lopez ed., *ibid*: 16-17), Nagarjuna attributed the ambiguities and diversity to the Buddha's skilful means (*upaya*) in adapting his message to his listeners' intellectual, psychological, and moral state of readiness to understand. Since Nagarjuna lived some five hundred years after the Buddha's death, this explanation has to be regarded as a rationalisation rather than historical fact; but it highlights the hermeneutic importance of the circumstances surrounding the origination of a text in the Zen tradition. This guideline means that problematic *sutras* should not be interpreted in isolation, but in the light of other *sutras* in which similar words or topics are clearly and unambiguously dealt with. Nor should all the *sutras* be understood in the light of problematic *sutras* (Lopez ed., *ibid*: 20).

Direct knowledge (*jnana*) is the refuge and not discursive consciousness (*vijnana*).

At first glance, this guideline seems like the fairly commonplace idea in western literary theory, that one should privilege insight or intuition over logical and research-based analysis[25]—"truth" over "method", to use Gadamer's terms. This would be a misunderstanding of the guideline. This guideline in fact links the reading of *sutras* back to the development of *prajna*, which, as has been discussed, always involves the use of logic up to the point where logic fails.

4.5.3   Vasubandhu's Three Natures critical procedure

As mentioned above (4.5.1), the Zen-based Reading Procedure will adopt a three-reading strategy based on a synthesise-investigate-validate format. To facilitate the investigative and validating steps of the Procedure, I shall be adapting Vasubandhu's Three Natures critical procedure, which he developed for deconstruction of imagined or constructed perceptions and the subject-object polarity. The Three Natures doctrine is mentioned in the *Lankavatara* (Suzuki 1978: 59-60) and in the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* (John Powers, trans. 1994: 81-91). It is however in the writings of Vasubandhu that we find it explained in depth and with an indication of how to use it. The two works associated with the topic are the "*Three Natures*" and the "*Thirty Verses*". Here I shall outline Vasubandhu's discussion of the Three Natures and his recommendation for its application.

The Three Natures refer to three aspects of a single experience or perception that presents itself to our consciousness. According to Vasubandhu, the three aspects present themselves to consciousness in a specific order. The first aspect is the "interdependent nature", the nature of phenomena or "that which appears" (Anacker 1984: 296n). Using the example of "the red flower" (4.3.2), this would be the configuration of colours "dependently-originating" from the interplay of light waves of a certain length bouncing off a particular surface and "hitting" our optic nerves. The second aspect is the "imagined" or "constructed nature", the nature of perception based on the subject-object polarity or "how it appears" (Anacker, *ibid*). This would be the object-perceived ("red flower") and its implied subject-perceiver ("I"). The third aspect is the "fulfilled" nature, the nature of "thusness", which is comprehended or experienced only when the interdependent nature ("that which appears") is released from the superimposition of the constructed nature ("how it appears").

The "fulfilled nature" is the nature of ultimate reality, "empty" or "void" of determinate meaning.

According to Vasubandhu, in comprehending the truth of things, all three "natures" have to be "taken together" because it is only when the "constructed nature" presents itself to our consciousness, that we can deconstruct it and set the "interdependent nature" free, thereby revealing the "fulfilled nature" (see Anacker, *ibid*: 297). Vasubandhu recommends that one should begin by analysing the "interdependent nature"; for the analysis will simultaneously expose the fictional nature of the "constructed nature" and reveal the "fulfilled nature". To take a simple example: "that which appears" to my consciousness now is a computer ("interdependent nature"); but "how it appears" to me is that it is "*my* computer" ("constructed nature"). On analysing the "interdependent nature" of the computer, I may realise that unless I, the presumed owner, do what is required by the nature of the computer's engineering, I cannot make the computer do what I want it to do. To this extent, it can be said that the computer owns me and not the other way around. The "constructed nature" or my perception of ownership having been exposed as pure fiction, the "fulfilled nature" or "thusness" of the computer, myself, and our relationship of dependent-origination is revealed. The Three Natures doctrine can be expressed in a formula, where "fulfilled nature" equals (=) "interdependent nature" minus (-) "constructed nature".

4.5.4   Principals and Satellites: Hua Yen analytic tool

In analysing fiction, attention to small details is often extremely important. The reader has to be able to get a comprehensive picture of how the different parts and aspects of a given novel (e.g. characters, events and motifs) are interrelated. For this kind of close analysis, I am borrowing the Principals and Satellites tool, used in Hua Yen philosophy to analyse the relationship of parts in a complex, dependently-originating whole. The nature and function of the tool is explained by several Hua Yen philosophers, among them Chih-yen in his treatise, *Ten Mysterious Gates of the Unitary Vehicle of the Hua Yen* (Cleary, trans. 1996: 125-146).

Hua Yen philosophers use the metaphor of Indra's Net to explain their concept of dependent-origination in terms of a universal textuality in which there is unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity—all in one and one in all. The universe is compared to

a net with a mirror at every node, each one reflecting all the others and itself. To understand in detail how the nodes are interrelated, each one has to be examined in turn. The node that is being examined is termed the "Principal" and the others around it the "Satellites". When one of the "Satellites" is examined, it becomes the "Principal", and the former "Principal" becomes a "Satellite" (see Cleary, *ibid*: 39 & 136-137). The Principals and Satellites analytical concept is important in Zen, because it allows differentiation of parts of a whole while countering the propensity to subjective discrimination and bias. As Cleary (*ibid*: 39) explains, "Since this doctrine applies to each individual thing, everything is at once both principal and satellite to everything else." The Hua Yen universe thus has no hierarchy and no centre, or, as F. Cook (1994: 4) suggests, "… perhaps if there is one [i.e. a centre], it is everywhere."

4.5.5   Ten Time Frames: Hua Yen analytic tool

Equally important in reading literary fiction is the ability to get a clear picture of how the interrelationships of the various aspects of the work (e.g. a novel) develop within the time frame of the novel. For this purpose, I am borrowing the Ten Time Frames analytic tool, also from Hua Yen philosophy, where it is used to examine "the various becoming of separate things in the ten time frames" (Cleary, *ibid*: 138). The "ten time frames" are (*ibid*: 38):

> … the past, present and future of the past, present and future, and the totality—that is, the past of the past, the present of the past, the future of the past, the past of the present, the present of the present, the future of the present, the past of the future, the present of the future, the future of the future, and the totality of all these times.

One of the more significant contributions made by the Hua Yen philosophers to the doctrine of dependent-origination is their inclusion of Time in the concept of textuality. Their articulation of the interconnectedness of all points in time to all other points in time enables both historical and historicist evaluation of events: historical in the sense that all the points are interdependent, definable only in terms of one another; historicist in that each point is nevertheless a distinct event in the order of things, each definable by its own past, present and future. The Ten Time Frames tool is therefore of significant value when applied to the analysis of fictional realities.

With the description of the Zen reading guidelines and critical tools that will be borrowed for the Zen-based Reading Procedure, the survey of relevant aspects of Zen discourses on the relationship between the development of *prajna* and the Zen approach to text is complete. The discussion of the implications of the research findings so far for the design of the Procedure will be done in the next chapter, together with explanations of how the reading guidelines and critical tools will be adapted for the analysis of modern and contemporary fiction.

4.6   SUMMARY

In this chapter, I explored how the problem of the *upadan*ic (appropriative) response to the world of the physical senses is transposed into the world of mental phenomena (e.g. words and other people's discourses); and how the transposition affects the Zen approach to the composition, reading, and understanding of texts, with emphasis on the *sutras* and *shastras*. In the process, the relationship between the development of *prajna* and the Zen approach to texts was examined. The first half of the chapter examined why *prajna* is important to the understanding of *sutras*; the second half examined why the reading of the *sutras* is important in the development of *prajna*.

In establishing the importance of *prajna* in the approach to texts, I showed through an analysis of the introductory narrative to the *Lankavatara* that in Zen, there is essentially no difference in the problems and solutions identified in understanding texts and in understanding the phenomenal world. The root cause of erroneous understanding is subjectivity, which leads to the adherence to the subject-object polarity, the tendency to split the world into dichotomies, and the propensity to cling to words and concepts as if they stand for permanent objects and eternal truths. Consequently, the recommended corrective to these appropriative or *upadan*ic tendencies is the development of *prajna*. Vasubandhu's theory of consciousness as a transformable stream of experience-"seeds", and his theory of perception as occurring in consciousness independent of external objects, were brought in to explain why, in Zen, no distinction is made between the way one responds to the phenomenal world and the way one responds to texts; why subjectivity can be overcome; and why intersubjective understanding and influence are possible through discourse. The examination of Vasubandhu's theories concluded with some observations as to why subjectivity-free reading of *sutras* is crucial to the attainment of Zen enlightenment.

The second half of the chapter examines why the reading of *sutras* is important in the development of *prajna*, especially in the light of the Zen assertion that the *sutras* can only point the way to ultimate truth. Based on my reader-response and literary analysis of the auto-commentaries and techniques of narration in the *Prajnaparamitas* and the *Lankavatara*, I argue that the auto-commentaries, the techniques of narration, and the doctrines in the *sutras* work together to activate the reader's *prajna* by "curing" him/her of his/her addiction to words, meanings, and closures. This is done by "luring" the reader with extravagant use of language and paradoxes to the point where imagination and logic break down and some level of *prajna*-insight is experienced. I infer from these reading experiences that the *sutras* are essentially metafictional, and teach a system of reverse hermeneutics, in which interpretation (or the formation of new fictions stimulated by one's responses to a given text) is disabled rather than enabled. I support my inference with Nagarjuna's description of his purpose and method in the composition of his *shastras*, which is to use literary fiction (discourse) to destroy erroneous, everyday fictions created by the mind's propensity for *upadana* and *prapanca*.

I conclude from my examination of the Zen approach to texts that in the Zen tradition, the development of *prajna* is closely related not only to the reading of *sutras*, but also to the creation of various types of literary fictions (e.g. *sutras*, *shastras*, parables, fables, stories, and discourses). The skill with which Zen writers create their literary fictions is linked in turn to their soteriological aim, which is to have such deep insight into the nature of fictions that they can skilfully use fiction to guide others to enlightenment. Zen philosophy can thus be said to be a complete treatise on existential as well as literary fictions, since their discourses focus on explaining how existential fictions are constructed, why they need to be deconstructed, and how they are to be deconstructed. Further, the discourses not only provide critical tools to enable the deconstruction; they also demonstrate the use of these critical tools.

The chapter closes with a brief account of the Zen reading procedures, guidelines, and critical concepts and tools that will be used in one way or another in the Zen-based Reading Procedure. They are the multiple-reading procedure suggested in the opening narrative of the *Lankavatara*; the four reading guidelines in the *Catuhpratisaranasutra* or "Four Refuges"; the Three Natures critical procedure expounded by Vasubandhu; and two analytic tools from Hua Yen philosophy, namely, the Principals and Satellites and the Ten

Time Frames. How these procedures, concepts and tools are adapted and used for the analysis of contemporary works of fiction will be explained in the next chapter.

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[1] A modern study that comes closest to doing so is Edward Hamlin's article "Discourse in the *Lankavatarasutra*", *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 11 1983: 267-313, http://lirs.ru/do/trans-lanka.html [19 December 2005].

[2] D. T. Suzuki's translation of the "full" version of the *Lankavatara Sutra*, which I use in this study, was first published in 1932. In the same year, the Epitomised Version of the *sutra* was published, a collaborative effort between D. T. Suzuki (translator) and Dwight Goddard (editor and compiler). The Epitomised Version, which is included in Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible* (1975, pp. 277-356), does not contain the opening narrative of Ravana's encounters with the Buddha. A likely reason for this excision is that Suzuki considered it a later addition to the *sutra*. In a note to the narrative in the translation of the full version, Suzuki (1978, p. 21*fn*) states: "there is no doubt about its being a later addition, seeing what a complete narrative it forms by itself, and again seeing that the rest of the text makes not further reference to Ravana…." Most modern scholars of the *Lankavatara* have not paid attention to the opening narrative. The only scholarly article I could find that dealt with the narrative specifically is Hamlin's article, cited in endnote 1 above.

[3] In Hindu mythology, Ravana is the demon-king who kidnaps Sita and is later vanquished by Rama, as told in the *Ramayana* epic. This *sutra*'s narrative, which is about Ravana's journey to enlightenment, may be read as a Buddhist undermining of the dualistic (good-versus-evil) perspective of the *Ramayana*, and an assertion that even beings viewed as demons can attain enlightenment.

[4] We should understand that this is not meant as an actual encounter, but a metaphor of Ravana's encounter with his own innate buddhic wisdom which, being awakened, now speaks to him where earlier it remained silent.

[5] Generally speaking, Buddhist meditation falls into two broad categories: *samadhi* or calming the mind, usually through one-pointed concentration on an object of meditation; and *vipasyana* or "insight" meditation, which involves analysis of the meditation object while in a state of *samadhi*. See Geshe Sopa, "*Samathavipasyanayuganaddha*: The two leading principles of Buddhist meditation" in Kiyota, ed. 1991, pp. 46-65; and A. Wayman, trans. 1979, *Calming the Mind and Discerning the Real: Buddhist Meditation and the Middle View. From the Lam rim chen mo of Tson-kha-pa*.

[6] Zen texts frequently refer to mind-constructed images as illusions created by magicians. As Nanananda explains his use of the simile in *The Magic of the Mind* (1985, p. 3), "it is merely an amplification of a canonical prototype attributed to the Buddha himself."

[7] The *Gandharvas* are mythical creatures of Hindu origin. In Buddhist texts, they are usually referred to as creators of illusions. The "cities of the *Gandharvas*" are supposed to be splendid, and are a metaphor for worldly illusions.

[8] It may be noted here that the narrative of Ravana's progress uses the paradigm in the generally accepted account Gautama Buddha's quest for enlightenment; he spent six years trying to discover the nature of reality from all kinds of yogis and philosophers before he decided to do it on his own.

[9] In Buddhism, *karma* refers only to actions taken with conscious intentions, and only such actions have a retributive effect. An action done without intention is called *kriya* (Humphreys, 1994, p. 111). It should be noted the Buddhist doctrine of *karma* has nothing to do with belief in an inexorable fate or destiny (see discussion of Buddhist theories of *karma* in Lusthaus, 2002, pp. 206-216).

[10] In Buddhism, the intention to be enlightened is known as *bodhicitta* ("enlightenment thought").

[11] Compare, for example, Georges Poulet's "Criticism and the Experience of Interiority" (in Selden 1988, pp. 200-211) where he describes reading as the "possession of myself by another".

[12] Compare Paul Ricoeur's discussion of reading as a "dialectic" between "appropriation" and "distanciation". In *Interpretation Theory* (1976) and *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences* (2005)

[13] See, for instance, the Introduction to R. Selden's *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (1989: pp. 3-4). In *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (1996: 1) Iser advocates discarding "the old opposition of fiction and reality" and replacing this duality with a "triad", namely, "the real, the fictive, and … the imaginary".

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[14] Vasubandhu has been described as a psychologist (e.g. Anacker, 1984), and his thought system has been referred to as a phenomenology (e.g. Lusthaus, 2002). Neither description does full justice to the breadth and depth of Vasubandhu's philosophical interests and investigations.

[15] For my paraphrase of Vasubandhu's theories, I rely mainly on Stefan Anacker's translation, commentaries, and notes on Vasubandhu's works in *Seven Works of Vasubandhu* (1984).

[16] Kochumuttom (1999, p. 12) summarises the development of the discourse on perception from Early Buddhism to the Yogacara (a time span of about one millennium) thus:

> What then is the characteristic mark of *samsara*? Early Buddhism characterized it as *duhkha* [suffering] arising from *trsna* (desire) or *upadana* (clinging=passionate attachment). The Yogacarins now go further and trace *trsna* or *upadana* to the arch-idiosyncrasy for discrimination between graspable and grasper … to which all other perverted distinctions and the consequent distorted picture of the universe are to be traced.

[17] Lin Chen Kuo (1991) gives the following information on the "seeds" (*bija*):

> "…in Asanga's *Mahayanasamgraha*, a Yogacara text written earlier and commented upon by his half brother Vasubandhu, the "seeds" are divided into three categories, (1) those perfumed by discourse …, (2) the conception of self …, and (3) the members of becoming. Those of category 2 cause the formation of ego-consciousness, those of category 3 cause rebirth, while those of the first category cause all perceptions, including sense-objects and their respective sense-organs. … "Discourse" is constituted of both nominal and perceptual activities. Nominal activities are directed to the referent (*artha*) by means of sound and words, while perceptual activities make objects manifest to consciousness without utilizing sounds and words. Both are indispensable for daily discourse whose sediments or residuals in the store consciousness are called "seeds".

[18] Vasubandhu explains in *Separation of the Middle from Extremes* (Anacker 1984, p. 261), that it is through "the force of susceptibility to harm that the pride of thinking 'I am' arises"; and in the *Twenty Verses* (*ibid*, p. 174) that "…it is through the state of an appearance of something which appears differently than it does later that there is a state of non-abandonment of the discrimination between object apprehended and subject apprehendor".

[19] This work is part of the volume listed in the References as *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*.

[20] An example of adapting teachings to the listener's capacity for understanding is the *Ananda Sutta*. Thanissaro, B. Trans. 2004. http://www.accesstoinsight.org/canon/samyutta/sn44-010.html [3 July 2005]. The "wanderer", Vacchagotta, asks the Buddha first whether there is a self, and then whether there is no self and gets no reply. When asked by his disciple, Ananda, why he remained silent, the Buddha explains that were he to say there is a self, it would be misconstrued that he is preaching the doctrine of the "eternalists", which is not in conformity with dependent-origination. On the other hand, were he to say that there is no self, it would not only be misconstrued that he is preaching the doctrine of the "nihilists"; but "the bewildered Vacchagotta would become even more bewildered [and ask himself]: 'Does the self I used to have now not exist?'"

[21] As Dan Lusthaus (2002, p. 178) notes, "… the point of Buddhist analysis is not the reification of a mental structure or theory of mind, but its erasure."

[22] In Chapter VIII, I shall examine how Lee Kok Liang uses this "puppet-kill-puppet" technique in his novel *Flowers in the sky*.

[23] The therapeutic and soteriological use of fictions to bring an end to psychological and social conflicts is the theme of two important discourses in Lee Kok Liang's *Flowers in the Sky* (see Chapter VII).

[24] See Nagapriya, D. No date. "Knowledge and Truth in Early Buddhism: An examination of the Kaalaama Sutta and related Pali Canonical Texts", *Western Buddhist Review Vol. 3*. http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol3/Knowledge.htm. [5 May 2000]. Nagapriya points out that the rejection of authority and reasoning power does not constitute a rejection of them as "bases of knowledge", but merely as "insufficient grounds *by themselves* to establish the validity of any proposed teaching".

[25]This impression is reinforced by Lamotte's rendering of *jnana* as "direct knowledge" and *vijnana* as "discursive consciousness".