



## **Buddha Practice Association Thesis Writing**

# **The Self–Nature Is Not Language or Words, How Can It Be Expressed with Language and Words**

## **Using Case Studies from the Śūrangama Sutra as Examples**

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## Abstract

This paper explores how language and words express "self-nature" in Buddhist scriptures, taking the case studies of "Observing the River to Discern Seeing" and "Rāhula Striking the Bell" from the Great Buddha Crown Tathāgata's Secret Cause for Cultivation and Realization of the Definitive Meaning of All Bodhisattvas' Myriad Practices Śūraṅgama Sutra as examples, analyzing their role in guiding practitioners to recognize self-nature. Self-nature, as a pure, unborn, and undying essence, though transcending language, can be pointed to through techniques such as metaphor, analogy,

contrast, symbolism, situational description, logical reasoning, and rhetorical questioning, from concrete phenomena pointing to abstract essence.

"Observing the River to Discern Seeing" contrasts the impermanence of the physical body with the unchanging "seeing nature," revealing its eternal and undying nature; "Rāhula Striking the Bell" reflects the arising and ceasing of sound against the clear "hearing nature," proving its transcendence over dullness and flux. Language and words, like "the finger pointing to the moon," through logical analysis and situational guidance, assist practitioners in moving from impermanent

phenomena toward recognition of self-nature, playing a transformative role. This study not only demonstrates the multifaceted functions of language in expressing self-nature but also provides new perspectives for future related research.

Keywords: Self-Nature, Language and Words, Observing the River to Discern Seeing, R ā hula Striking the Bell, Seeing Nature, Hearing Nature

## Chapter One: Introduction

In the profound wisdom of Buddhism, "self-nature" is like a radiant pearl, guiding practitioners toward the shore of awakening, stepping toward the path of becoming a Buddha. For Mahayana practitioners, self-nature is the fundamental means of cultivation. The Great Buddha Crown Tathāgata's Secret Cause for Cultivation and Realization of the Definitive Meaning of All Bodhisattvas' Myriad Practices Śūraṅgama Sutra points out that if one does not know the "two kinds of roots"—namely, sentient beings mistakenly

taking the clinging mind as self-nature, and forgetting the inherently pure self-nature—cultivation is like cooking sand into rice, even after countless eons, it remains futile and without merit. The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch also clearly states: "The self-nature of Bodhi, originally pure, simply use this mind, directly become a Buddha." It further says: "Not recognizing the original mind, studying the Dharma is without benefit; if one recognizes their original mind, sees their original nature, they are called a great person, a teacher of humans and gods, a Buddha." It can be seen that recognizing self-nature is the key

to liberation, its importance is self-evident. However, self-nature is pure and true, transcending the scope of expression of language and words, difficult to be completely captured. Despite this, language is not entirely useless. It is like the finger pointing to the moon, though not the moon itself, it can guide the direction, helping people glimpse the truth. Similarly, though language and words are not self-nature, they can serve as a medium, pointing to self-nature, assisting practitioners in realizing its true meaning.

To explore how language and words express self-nature, this paper takes the Great Buddha Crown Tath

ā gata' s Secret Cause for Cultivation and  
Realization of the Definitive Meaning of All  
Bodhisattvas' Myriad Practices Ś ū raṅgama Sutra as  
the basis for analysis, selecting "Observing the  
River to Discern Seeing" and "R ā hula Striking the  
Bell" as two case studies, from a Buddhist  
perspective, exploring how language and words in the  
sutra, through specific techniques, manifest the  
characteristics of self-nature, guiding Mahayana  
practitioners to recognize self-nature.

Chapter Two: Techniques of Language and Words  
in Guiding Recognition of Self-Nature

Though self-nature transcends language, it does not mean we can only remain silent. Language and words, as tools for human understanding and communication, if used appropriately, can play a guiding and pointing function, like a nautical chart guiding a ship to reach the shore. This chapter takes "Observing the River to Discern Seeing" and "Rāhula Striking the Bell" from the Great Buddha Crown Tathāgata's Secret Cause for Cultivation and Realization of the Definitive Meaning of All Bodhisattvas' Myriad Practices Śūraṅgama Sutra as examples, analyzing how language and words, through

seven techniques—metaphor, analogy, contrast, symbolism, situational description, logical reasoning, and rhetorical questioning—help practitioners understand self-nature. Among them, "Observing the River to Discern Seeing" reveals the unborn and undying and eternally constant nature of "seeing nature," "R ā hula Striking the Bell" verifies the transcendence of "hearing nature" over arising and ceasing, both being specific manifestations of self-nature.

## 1. Metaphor

Metaphor is using familiar things to explain

abstract concepts. In "Observing the River to Discern Seeing," the Buddha uses the flowing river water as a metaphor for the changes of the physical body, showing its impermanent quality. In "Rāhula Striking the Bell," the rising and falling of the bell sound is used as a metaphor for the flux of form and sound, laying the groundwork for later exploring the constancy of "hearing nature."

## 2. Analogy

Analogy is explaining unfamiliar concepts through similarity. In "Observing the River to Discern Seeing," the flowing Ganges River water is

analogous to the changes of the physical body, guiding King Prasenajit to recognize the impermanence of the body, preparing for the unchanging "seeing nature." In "Rāhula Striking the Bell," the rising and falling of the bell sound is analogous to the impermanence of form and sound, and hearing sound in a dream is analogous to the "hearing nature" not being dull, highlighting its constant clarity.

### 3. Contrast

Contrast is highlighting differences to emphasize characteristics. In "Observing the River

to Discern Seeing," the arising and ceasing of the physical body contrast with the unchanging "seeing nature," the Buddha using "wrinkled" and "not wrinkled" to distinguish change from no change, revealing self-nature's unchanging and unwrinkled nature. In "Rāhula Striking the Bell," the presence and absence of sound contrast with the constant "hearing nature," guiding the distinction between arising-ceasing and true constancy.

#### 4. Symbolism

Symbolism is using concrete things to express abstract meanings. In "Observing the River to

Discern Seeing," the flowing Ganges River water symbolizes the impermanence of all phenomena. In "Rāhula Striking the Bell," the arising and ceasing of the bell sound symbolize the flux of form and sound. Also, hearing sound in a dream symbolizes the non-dull characteristic of self-nature, showing that whether in a dream or awake, the "ability to hear" remains clear.

## 5. Situational Description

Situational description provides specific contexts to deepen understanding. In "Observing the River to Discern Seeing," the Buddha designs a

scenario for King Prasenajit to recall changes in the physical body, guiding him to perceive the body's impermanence. In "Rāhula Striking the Bell," the Buddha designs a scenario of striking the bell, the sound arising and ceasing, repeatedly questioning Ānanda, revealing the difference between sound and hearing nature. The dream scenario of one person sleeping is constructed to make Venerable Ānanda and the assembly understand that hearing nature is not dull.

## 6. Logical Reasoning

Logical reasoning is deriving conclusions from

premises. In "Observing the River to Discern Seeing," the Buddha asks the king: The body from age three to sixty-two continuously ages, why does your perception of the Ganges River water always remain "seemingly unchanged"? The king answers, whether at three, thirteen, or sixty-two, his seeing nature of the Ganges River has not changed. Logically, if "seeing nature" depended on time, body, or river water and changed, the perception (seeing) should differ; but the perception has not changed, showing that "seeing nature" shines spiritually alone, not changing with changes in time, body, or river water. Therefore, seeing nature is unchanging.

In "Rāhula Striking the Bell," the Buddha uses the bell sound as an example, arguing that sound has arising and ceasing, while hearing nature is constant. The bell sound arises and then disappears; if hearing nature extinguished with it, when the sound arises again, it should not be heard, but this is not the case, thus hearing nature does not change with the arising and ceasing of sound. Additionally, the Buddha uses "hearing pounding rice sound in a dream" as an example, further explaining that hearing nature is not dull. If hearing nature were dull in sleep, one should not perceive the pounding rice sound in a dream, yet people can still hear,

showing that hearing nature remains spiritually clear in dreams. From this, it is deduced that hearing nature is constant and not dull.

## 7. Rhetorical Questioning

Rhetorical questioning provokes reflection to emphasize viewpoints. In "Observing the River to Discern Seeing," the Buddha asks: "Is your physical body like vajra, eternally constant and undecaying, or does it decay?" This 启发 (inspires) King Prasenajit to perceive the body's impermanence; in "Rāhula Striking the Bell," "What do you hear? What do you not hear?" points out the distinction between

"hearing nature" and sound.

The above seven aspects demonstrate the guiding role of language and words in expressing self-nature; the next section will verify their practical application with specific cases.

### Chapter Three: Empirical Evidence of Language Expressing Self-Nature in Scriptural Case Studies

Self-nature, the origin of all phenomena, is a pure, undefiled, unborn, undying, all-pervading true entity of the Dharma realm. It transcends all distinctions and oppositions, is eternally constant,

absolutely equal. It does not increase in the noble, does not decrease in the ordinary. Self-nature is like a four-dimensional solid, filling the void, pervading the Dharma realm. Its aliases are numerous, such as Bodhi, Nirvana, True Suchness, Buddha-Nature, Amala Consciousness, Empty Tath ā gatagarbha, Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom, Wondrously Clear True Mind, True Suchness Nature, etc., all pointing to this one essence. Seeing nature, hearing nature, etc., are all one of the countless inherent abilities of self-nature.

This chapter takes "Observing the River to Discern Seeing" and "R ā hula Striking the Bell" from

the Great Buddha Crown Tathāgata's Secret Cause for Cultivation and Realization of the Definitive Meaning of All Bodhisattvas' Myriad Practices Śūraṅgama Sutra as examples, verifying how language and words point from concrete phenomena to self-nature, guiding practitioners to recognize its unborn, undying, and pure, wondrously constant qualities. Through refining the reasoning process, this chapter will demonstrate how the Buddha gradually unfolds logic, transforming observation at the phenomenal level into profound recognition of self-nature's essence.

## 1. Observing the River to Discern Seeing

In the "Observing the River to Discern Seeing" case study, the Buddha, through a series of dialogues, gradually guides King Prasenajit to recognize the eternal constancy of "seeing nature." The dialogue begins with a rhetorical question: "Is your physical body like vajra, eternally constant and undecaying, or does it decay?" This question directly points to the essence of the physical body, making King Prasenajit reflect on its changeability.

After King Prasenajit answers "ultimately it decays," the Buddha immediately uses the metaphor "like fire becoming ash" to depict the process of the physical body's moment-by-moment change, and

with subdivisions of time (ten years, a year, a month, a day, even an instant) symbolizes the body's constant change without a moment's pause, its impermanent characteristic. This description establishes the foundation for subsequent reasoning: the physical body is a conditioned phenomenon of arising and ceasing, moment by moment arising and ceasing, decaying until it ultimately perishes.

Next, the Buddha rhetorically asks: "Also at the time of decay, do you know there is something in your body that does not decay?" This question shifts the focus from the "change" and "decay" of the physical body to the exploration of "unchanging" and

"undecaying," inspiring King Prasenajit to seek something transcending impermanence. To unfold the reasoning, the Buddha introduces a specific scenario, requiring King Prasenajit to recall experiences of observing the Ganges River at ages three, thirteen, and up to sixty-two. King Prasenajit answers: "As at three years old, seemingly unchanged, even now at sixty-two, also without difference." Here, the Buddha unfolds logic with analogy: If "seeing nature" relied on the physical body, then as the body aged (e.g., eyes dimming, memory declining), its perception should change, such as the Ganges River possibly becoming blurry or hard to discern.

If "seeing nature" relied on time, then "seeing nature" should disappear with time; yet, what is it seeing with now? However, King Prasenajit's answer negates this assumption, his "seeing nature" at different times, different ages, and different river conditions remains unaffected, always clear as before. If "seeing nature" changed with time, body, or river water, then perception (seeing) should differ; yet perception has not changed, this shows "seeing nature" shines spiritually alone, not changing with changes in time, body, or river water.

This phenomenon triggers a key question: the Buddha seizes the moment to deepen reasoning with

contrast: "You now lament your white hair and wrinkled face, your face surely more wrinkled than in childhood; then when you now observe this Ganges River, compared to your childhood observation of the river, is there youth or old age in that seeing?" King Prasenajit answers: "No, World-Honored One." Here, the Buddha contrasts the "wrinkling" of the physical body (change) with the "not wrinkling" of the "seeing essence" (unchanging), proposing a logical conclusion: "That which wrinkles is change, that which does not wrinkle is not change; that which changes is subject to decay, that which does not change originally has no arising or ceasing. How

could it, within this, be subject to your birth and death?" The reasoning steps are as follows:

Premise One: The physical body, due to years, "wrinkles," "wrinkling" belongs to "change."

Premise Two: The "seeing essence" does not "wrinkle" with the body's "wrinkling," "not wrinkling" does not change.

Inference: That which "changes" is subject to decay, all conditioned phenomena that "change" are subject to causes and conditions, with birth and death due to causes and conditions; that which "does not change" originally has no arising or ceasing, transcends the birth and death of causes and

conditions. This breaks King Prasenajit's misunderstanding of "body dies, all perishes," and refutes externalist (e.g., Maskari) views that everything perishes with the physical body.

Reasoning up to this point, starting from the impermanence of the physical body, step-by-step proves that the self-nature capable of seeing does not change with the body, does not arise or cease with the body, possessing the characteristic of being unborn and undying, language and words through this logical process closely connect phenomena and essence.

## 2. Rāhula Striking the Bell

In the "Rāhula Striking the Bell" case study, the Buddha has Rāhula strike the bell to create alternating scenarios of "sound" and "no sound," forming a contrast as the starting point for discerning "hearing nature." The Buddha first instructs Rāhula to strike the bell and asks Ānanda: "Do you hear now?" Ānanda replies: "I hear." After the bell sound ceases, he asks again: "Do you hear now?" Ānanda replies: "I do not hear." On the surface, Ānanda's answers seem to align with common sense, but the Buddha immediately counters with a rhetorical question: "What do you mean by hearing?"

What do you mean by not hearing?" pointing out his confusion between hearing and sound.

To clarify this point and guide Ānanda to recognize the constancy and clarity of "hearing nature," the Buddha first uses the metaphor of dry wood, unfolding detailed reasoning:

Premise One: Sound arises and ceases due to external conditions (such as striking the bell or stopping), belonging to impermanent phenomena.

Premise Two: If "hearing nature" existed or ceased with sound, then when there is no sound, "hearing nature" should lose its function like dry wood, unable to hear again.

Fact: When the bell sound arises again, Ānanda can still perceive hearing, proving that "hearing nature" does not vanish with the disappearance of sound.

Inference: "Hearing nature" does not depend on the presence or absence of sound to change; its essence is constant and independent.

The Buddha then uses a dream analogy to verify the characteristic of "hearing nature" not being dull. He describes a person asleep hearing the sound of pounding cloth or rice, mistaking it in the dream for a drum or bell. Although consciousness is dull and judgment inaccurate, "hearing nature" remains

spiritually clear, distinctly perceiving the sound.

The Buddha asks rhetorically: "If hearing nature were dull, how could it hear in a dream?" The reasoning is as follows:

Premise One: When consciousness is dull, judgment is limited, but the ability to perceive sound is not lost.

Premise Two: If "hearing nature" were lost with the dullness of consciousness, like a blurred mirror unable to reflect objects, then nothing should be heard in a dream.

Fact: Sound is still heard in the dream, proving that "hearing nature" is not altered by the state

of consciousness.

Conclusion: "Hearing nature" is not dull, always clear.

The Buddha further explains that the rising and falling of sound is like the arising and ceasing phenomena of form and sound, belonging to impermanence; while the constancy and non-dullness of "hearing nature" symbolize the pure, wondrously constant essence of "self-nature." Sentient beings, due to beginningless attachment to arising-ceasing phenomena, fail to awaken to the purity of their nature, thus falling into defilement and flux.

Finally, the Buddha teaches: "If you abandon

arising and ceasing, hold to true constancy, the constant light manifests, and the roots, dust, and consciousness-mind fall away at that moment." This conclusion not only responds to Ānanda's doubt about "no mind, no realization of the path," but also reveals that abandoning impermanence and holding to true constancy can achieve the cultivation path of unsurpassed awakening.

This case study begins with the bell-striking scenario, through rhetorical questioning and logical analysis clarifies the distinction between "sound" and "hearing," then uses a dream analogy to prove "hearing nature" is not dull, layer by layer

deducing the pure, wondrous constancy of "self-nature."

In summary, this chapter, through the two case studies of "Observing the River to Discern Seeing" and "Rāhula Striking the Bell," elucidates how the Buddha skillfully employs language and words, gradually guiding from concrete phenomena to abstract essence. These two case studies demonstrate the multifaceted functions of language and words, not only as tools for describing phenomena but also, through layered analysis and reasoning, pointing to "self-nature."

## Chapter Four: Conclusion

Self-nature possesses the qualities of being unborn and undying, pure, and wondrously constant; though it transcends the direct expression of language and words, it can be recognized through the guidance of language. This paper takes "Observing the River to Discern Seeing" and "Rāhula Striking the Bell" from the Great Buddha Crown Tathāgata's Secret Cause for Cultivation and Realization of the Definitive Meaning of All Bodhisattvas' Myriad Practices Śūraṅgama Sutra as examples, analyzing how language and words use metaphor, analogy, contrast, symbolism, situational description,

logical reasoning, and rhetorical questioning to point from impermanent phenomena to the essence of self-nature. "Observing the River to Discern Seeing" contrasts the changes of the physical body with the unchanging "seeing nature," revealing its unborn and undying nature; "Rāhula Striking the Bell" reflects the arising and ceasing of sound against the constant "hearing nature," highlighting its clarity and non-dullness, and responds to Ānanda's doubt about realizing the path, arguing that holding to true constancy can achieve unsurpassed awakening. Language and words are like "the finger pointing to the moon," through diverse techniques assisting

practitioners in moving from phenomena toward recognition of self-nature, playing a transformative role from the concrete to the abstract. In short, though language and words cannot fully express self-nature, they serve as a medium for recognizing self-nature. Future research can further explore the ways language expresses self-nature in other scriptures and their limitations, providing new perspectives for deepening the study of self-nature.

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