

The Idea of Man in Buddhist Medicine: A Philosophical Inquiry based on the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*

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I. Introduction

- This paper focuses on the life medicine and life cultivation to discuss how Buddhism perceives sentient beings or human beings in the life world as well as the elucidation of theories and religious practices that are relevant to the cognition as such.

Textual Sources

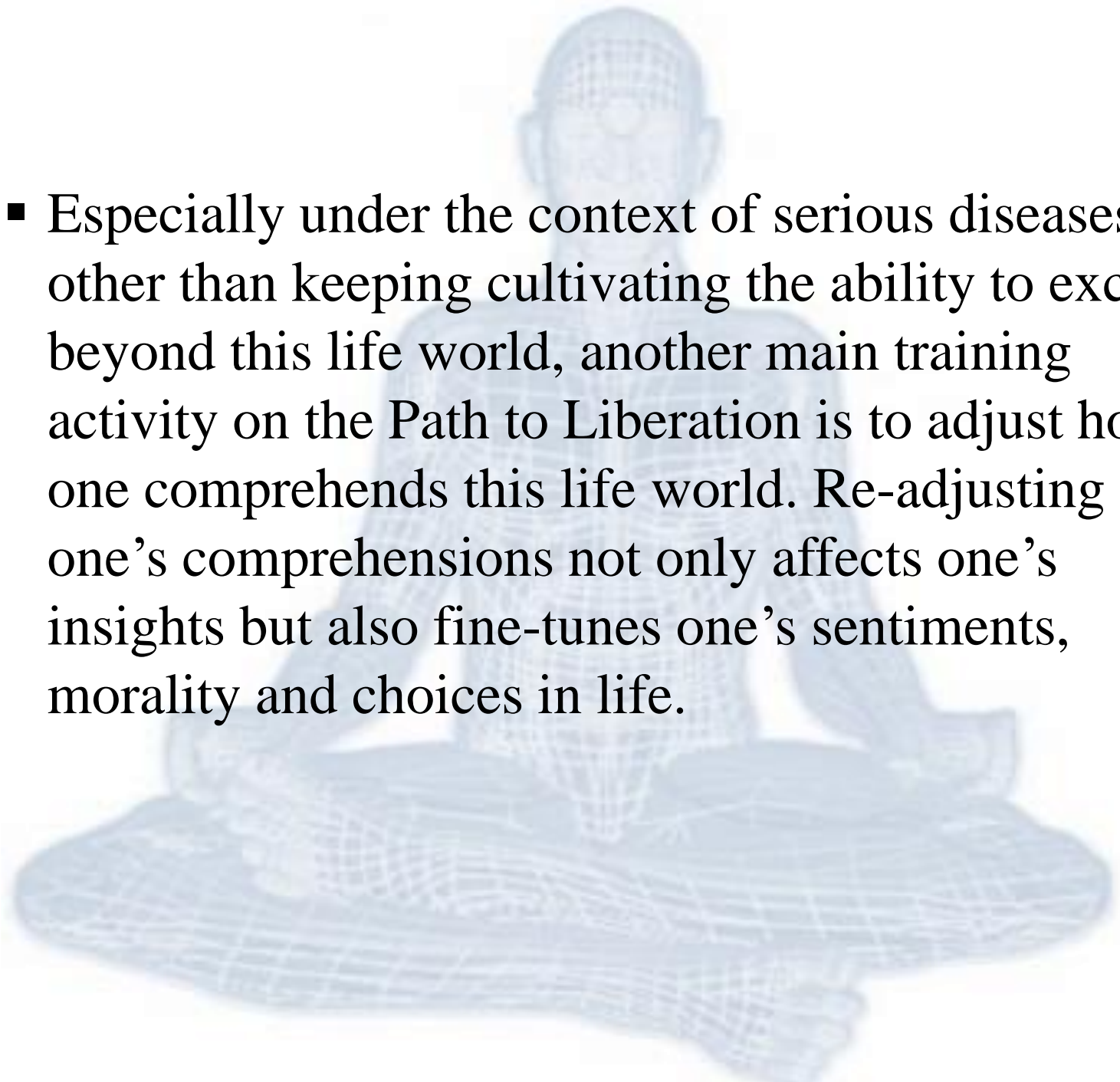
- The textual sources include the *Āgama Sūtra*, *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, with *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* as the main one so as to encompass the most representative *Sūtras* on both the Path to Liberation and the Path to Enlightenment.

II. Human Beings as Perceived from the Path to Liberation with the *Āgama Sūtra* as an Example

- The *Āgama Sūtra* reveals that even though the Path to Liberation identifies human beings as one of the pathways of sentient beings (*manuṣya-gati*/ pathway of human life/ 人道, 人趣) or a circle of existence among various sentient beings who enter into the life world, human beings are not considered to occupy any specific area exclusively; nor do human beings exhibit any idiosyncratic essence.
- All aspects regarding biology, emotion, cognition, morality, culture, or religion maneuvered by human beings in the life world are produced under the context of related conditions in constant flux.
- There is not any essence that can be exclusively identified to human beings. Further more, all the identifiable kernels are manifestations that do not contain any substantial fixed content.

- The Buddhist Path to Liberation employs sets of items as starting points, including the five composing parts, *skandha* (aggregate/ 蘊), the six or twelve entrances for corporal sensations, *āyatana* (gate; sense-base/ 入處), and the eighteen perception units not unlike the color pigments on the palette, *dhātu* (perception factor/ 界), to observe all sentient beings in the life world without discrimination.
- By identifying the composing parts (*skandha*), sense-bases (*āyatana*), and perception factors (*dhātu*) the starting units of observation, Buddhist Path to Liberation stresses the importance of observing how the aggregation and dissipation of these units in flux changes the course of life journey.
- All human beings and even all other sentient beings alike, despite the time elapsed in lives, are experiencing their respective lives linked together by segments of birth, aging, sickness, and death.

- The Path to Liberation will not be merely confined in acquiring thoroughgoing comprehension or correct understandings. It will go beyond and seek liberation from the afflictions incurred while living in the life world, including the sufferings from sicknesses.
- The *Sūtra* makes a simile of referring the Buddhas as *mahā-vaidya-rāja* (great king of physicians/ 大醫王).
- Even though the Buddhas are referred to be the kings of great physicians, the treatment provided by the Buddhist Path to Liberation is not monopolized by the physicians.
- It is in fact a teamwork from both parties and it also trains sentient beings who are interested to become physicians in the future.
- The training or cultivation as such is referred to as practice.

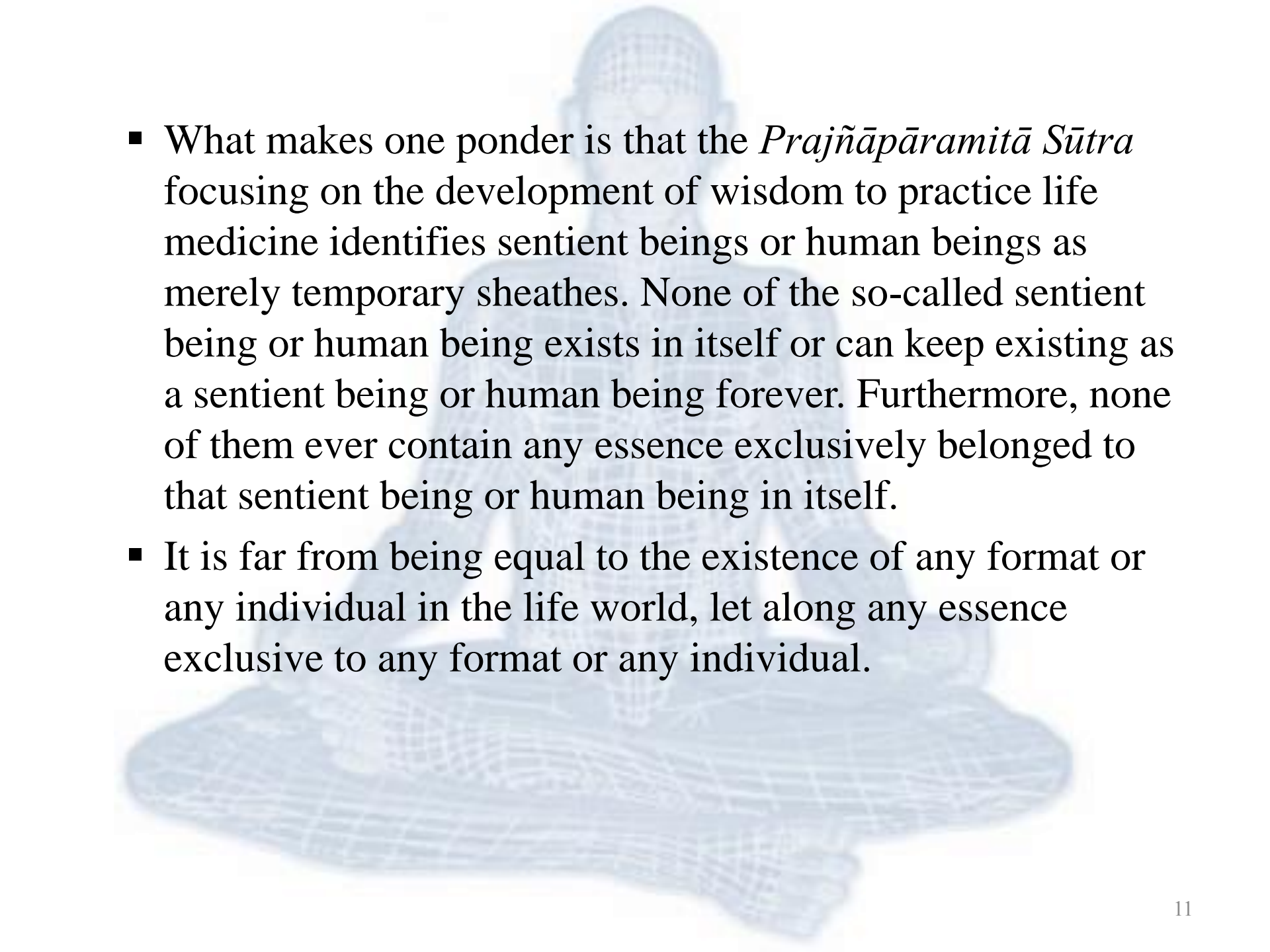
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- Especially under the context of serious diseases, other than keeping cultivating the ability to excel beyond this life world, another main training activity on the Path to Liberation is to adjust how one comprehends this life world. Re-adjusting one's comprehensions not only affects one's insights but also fine-tunes one's sentiments, morality and choices in life.

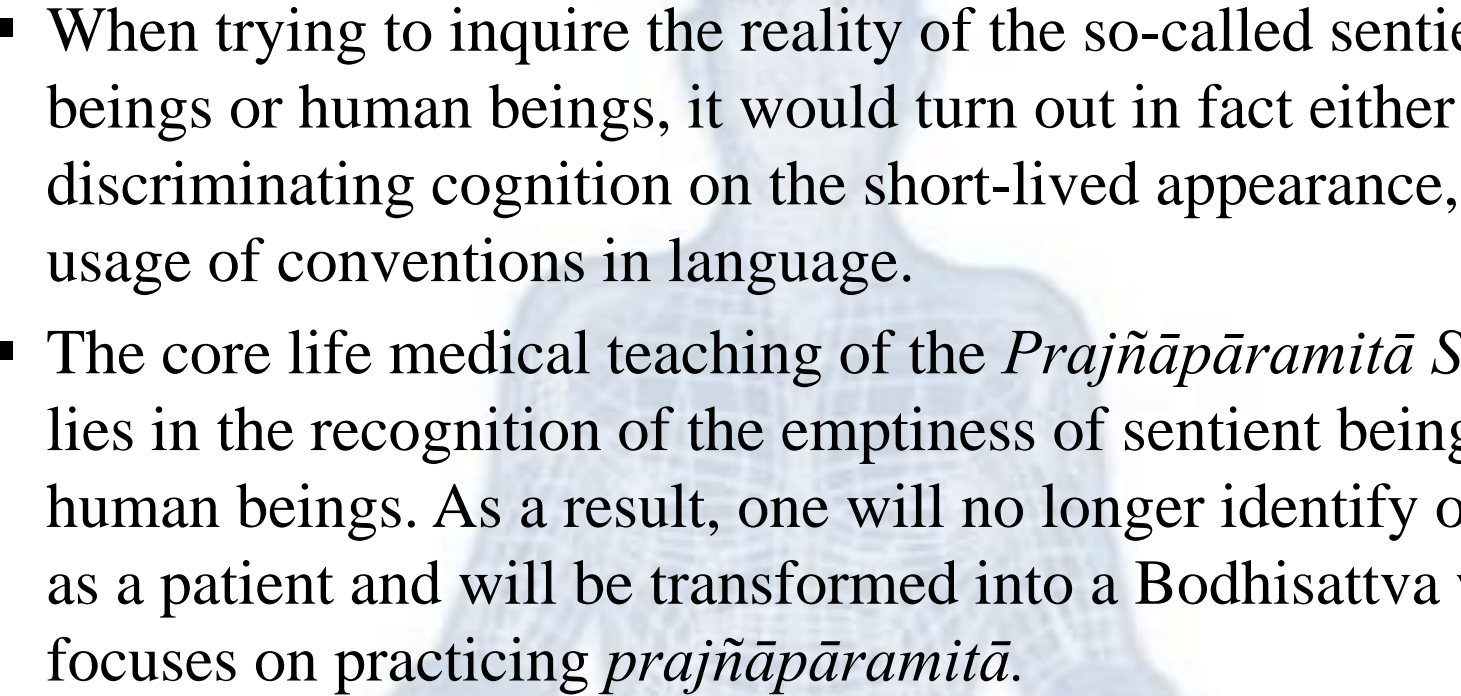
- Most people often yield to the conventional understandings that the vocabularies such as human beings and self can be mapped to the respective existences of human beings and self in the life world. As a result, mediocre and self-restricting comprehensions are formed. However, grave illnesses provide great opportunities for one to recognize and realize that the so-called human beings or self are merely loose combinations during constant flux that are prone to decay rapidly. After the realization, the only way to solve this problem once and for all is to adjust the understanding of those so-called human beings and self to not-human beings and not-self.

III. Human Beings as Perceived from the Path to Enlightenment with the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* as an Example

- As a path of practices, the goal of Buddhist Path to Liberation lies in excelling beyond the birth, aging, sickness and death of the life world. While the goal in Buddhist Path to Enlightenment lies in an all-encompassing and thorough enlightenment as well as to further guide and transform sentient beings, and purify the world in a grand scale for an extremely long period of time.
- The Buddhist Path to Enlightenment employs wisdom as the main frame. The *Prajñā-pāramitā Sūtra* focuses on the practices of *prajñā-pāramitā* (perfection of wisdom) through contemplating emptiness, non-duality, and manifestation to unravel the so-called existed entities into smaller units that can then transform among other beings.

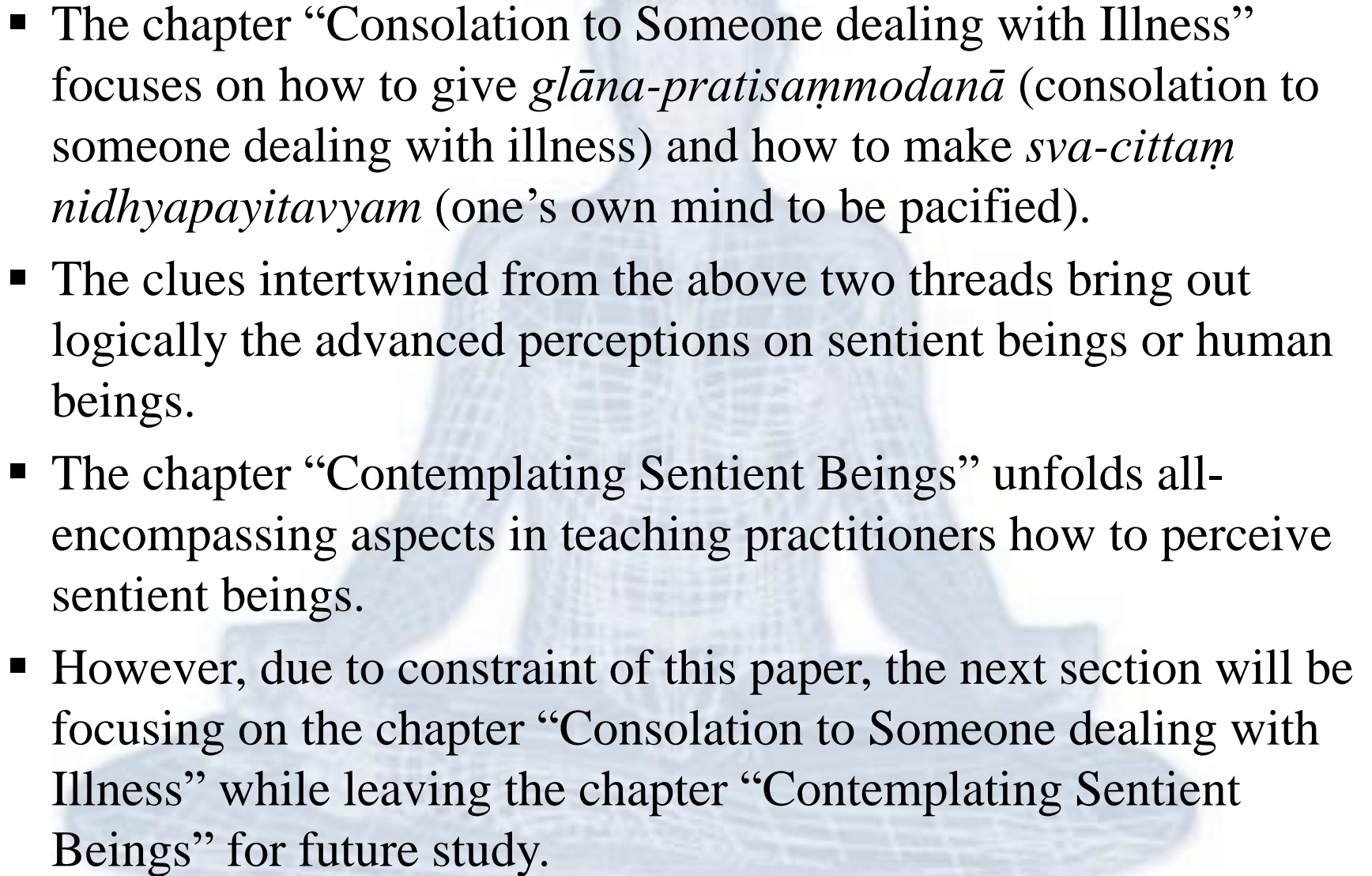
- The *Prajñā-pāramitā Sūtra* also stresses the cooperation between the teachers and the learners in life medicine. The main objective that the text focuses on is to cure the disease of oblivion to the context of the life world while living in it.
- In order to become a learned doctor, the prerequisites include the following: to be endowed with skills in diagnosis, to be skilled in all remedies, to be skilled in the [knowledge of the] origin of all diseases, with a kind heart that are compassionate to all sentient beings, and being a liberator from all illnesses.
- The specialized cultivation, thorough cognition, and compassionate mind can attain the following achievements: to be conducive to the appeasing of all ignorance, to be conducive to the removal of all suffering, and to be conducive to the appeasing of all decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness and despair.

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- What makes one ponder is that the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* focusing on the development of wisdom to practice life medicine identifies sentient beings or human beings as merely temporary sheathes. None of the so-called sentient being or human being exists in itself or can keep existing as a sentient being or human being forever. Furthermore, none of them ever contain any essence exclusively belonged to that sentient being or human being in itself.
 - It is far from being equal to the existence of any format or any individual in the life world, let along any essence exclusive to any format or any individual.

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- When trying to inquire the reality of the so-called sentient beings or human beings, it would turn out in fact either be a discriminating cognition on the short-lived appearance, or usage of conventions in language.
 - The core life medical teaching of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* lies in the recognition of the emptiness of sentient beings or human beings. As a result, one will no longer identify oneself as a patient and will be transformed into a Bodhisattva who focuses on practicing *prajñāpāramitā*.

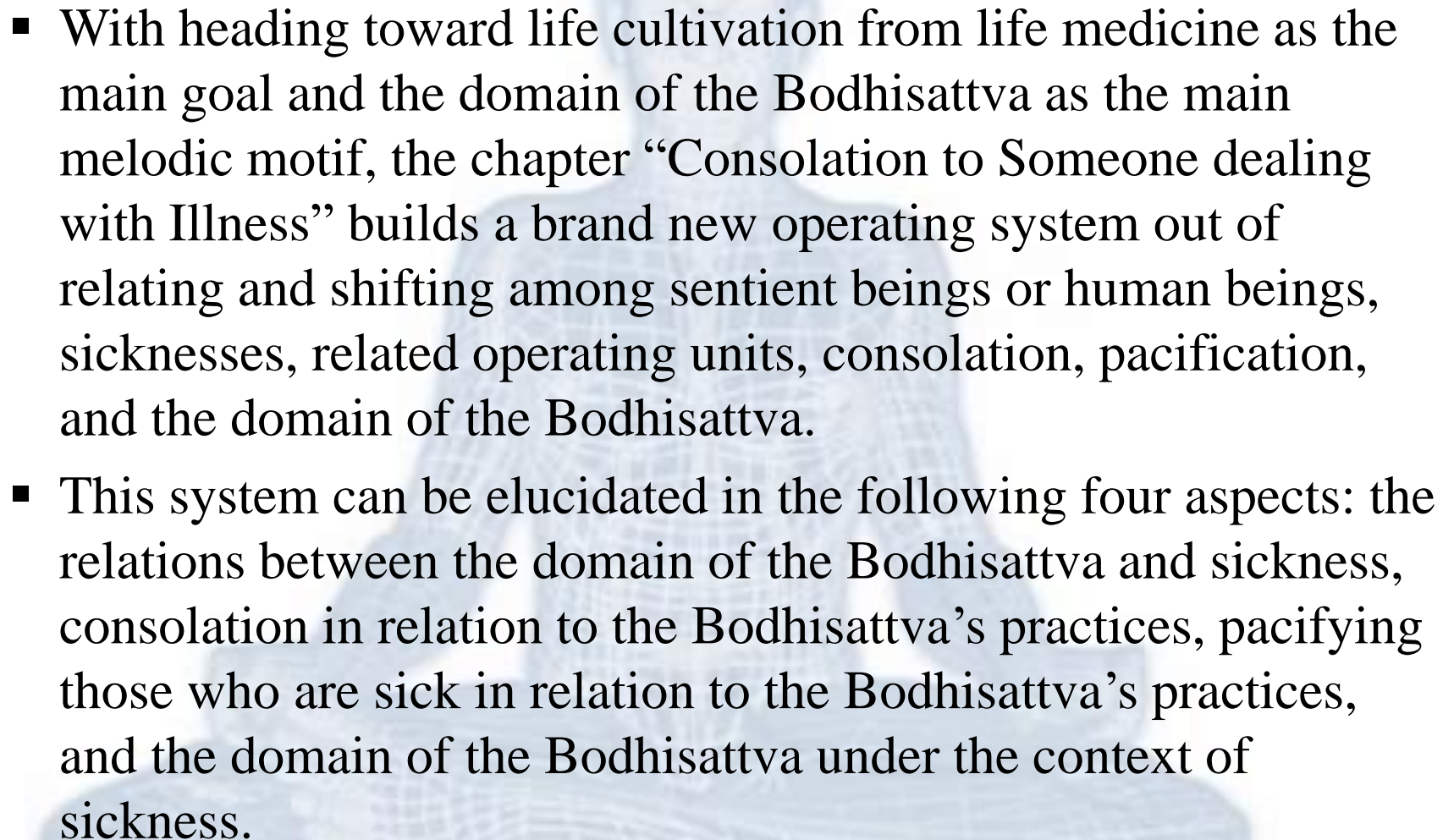
IV. Two Chapters of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* that Teach How to Perceive Mankind: “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness” and “Contemplating Sentient Beings”

- The *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* is famous for its advanced Path to Enlightenment.
- Based on this idea of advance, the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* perceives sentient beings or human beings in an advanced attitude and also takes on advanced practices of the Bodhisattva. Even though the entire *Sūtra* is about how Buddhist Path to Enlightenment perceives sentient beings or human beings, if one wishes to narrow down the text, then chapters “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness” and “Contemplating Sentient Beings” deserve special attention.

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- The chapter “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness” focuses on how to give *glāna-pratisaṃmodanā* (consolation to someone dealing with illness) and how to make *sva-cittaṃ nidhyapayitavyam* (one’s own mind to be pacified).
 - The clues intertwined from the above two threads bring out logically the advanced perceptions on sentient beings or human beings.
 - The chapter “Contemplating Sentient Beings” unfolds all-encompassing aspects in teaching practitioners how to perceive sentient beings.
 - However, due to constraint of this paper, the next section will be focusing on the chapter “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness” while leaving the chapter “Contemplating Sentient Beings” for future study.

V. Human Beings Perceived through Consolation with the Chapter “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness” as an Example

- The chapter in question starts when Shakyamuni Buddha asked Mañjuśrīḥ kumara-bhūtaḥ (the crown prince, Mañjuśrī/ 文殊 (師利) 菩薩) to pay a visit to Vimalakīrtir licchaviḥ (Vimalakīrti of the Licchavi clan/ 維摩詰) who was sick at that moment, and then the following life medicinal treatment is unfolded: how to console those who are sick and how to pacify the mind when one is sick.
- The main theme of the chapter “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness” is the process from life medicine to life cultivation.
- The melody played as such is called *Bodhisattva-gocara* (the domain of the Bodhisattva) in the chapter “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness.”

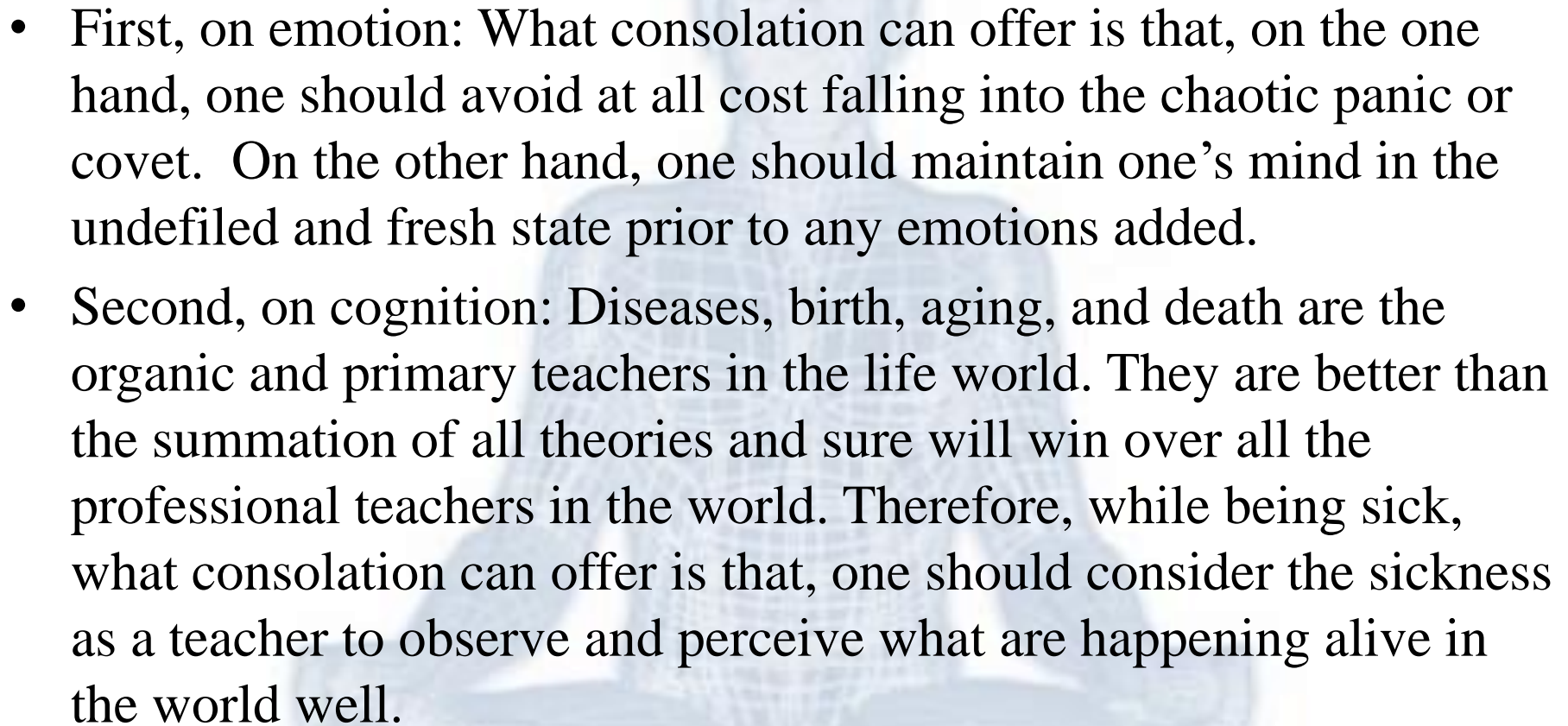
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- With heading toward life cultivation from life medicine as the main goal and the domain of the Bodhisattva as the main melodic motif, the chapter “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness” builds a brand new operating system out of relating and shifting among sentient beings or human beings, sicknesses, related operating units, consolation, pacification, and the domain of the Bodhisattva.
 - This system can be elucidated in the following four aspects: the relations between the domain of the Bodhisattva and sickness, consolation in relation to the Bodhisattva’s practices, pacifying those who are sick in relation to the Bodhisattva’s practices, and the domain of the Bodhisattva under the context of sickness.

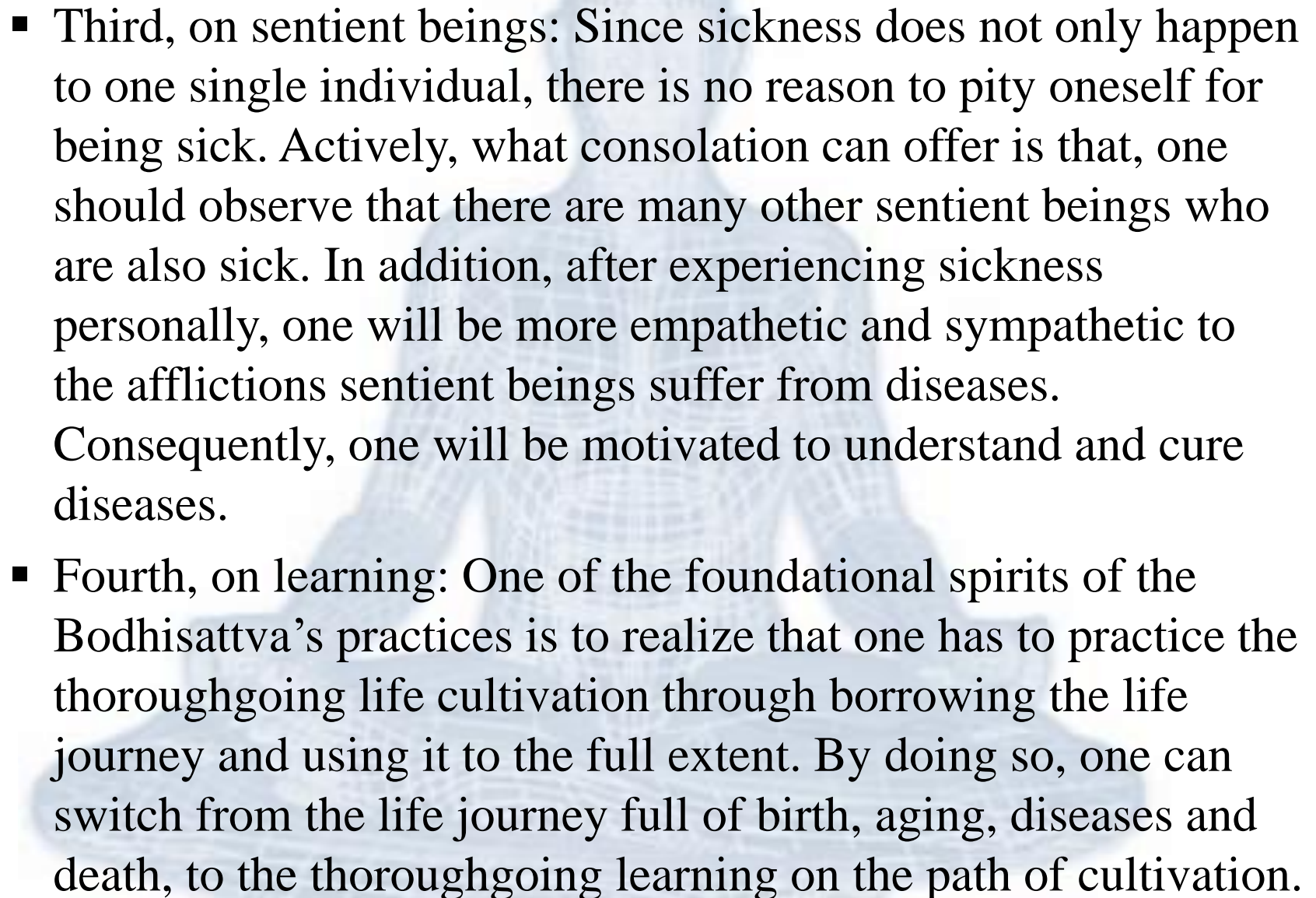
(V.1) The Relations between the Domain of the Bodhisattva and Sickness

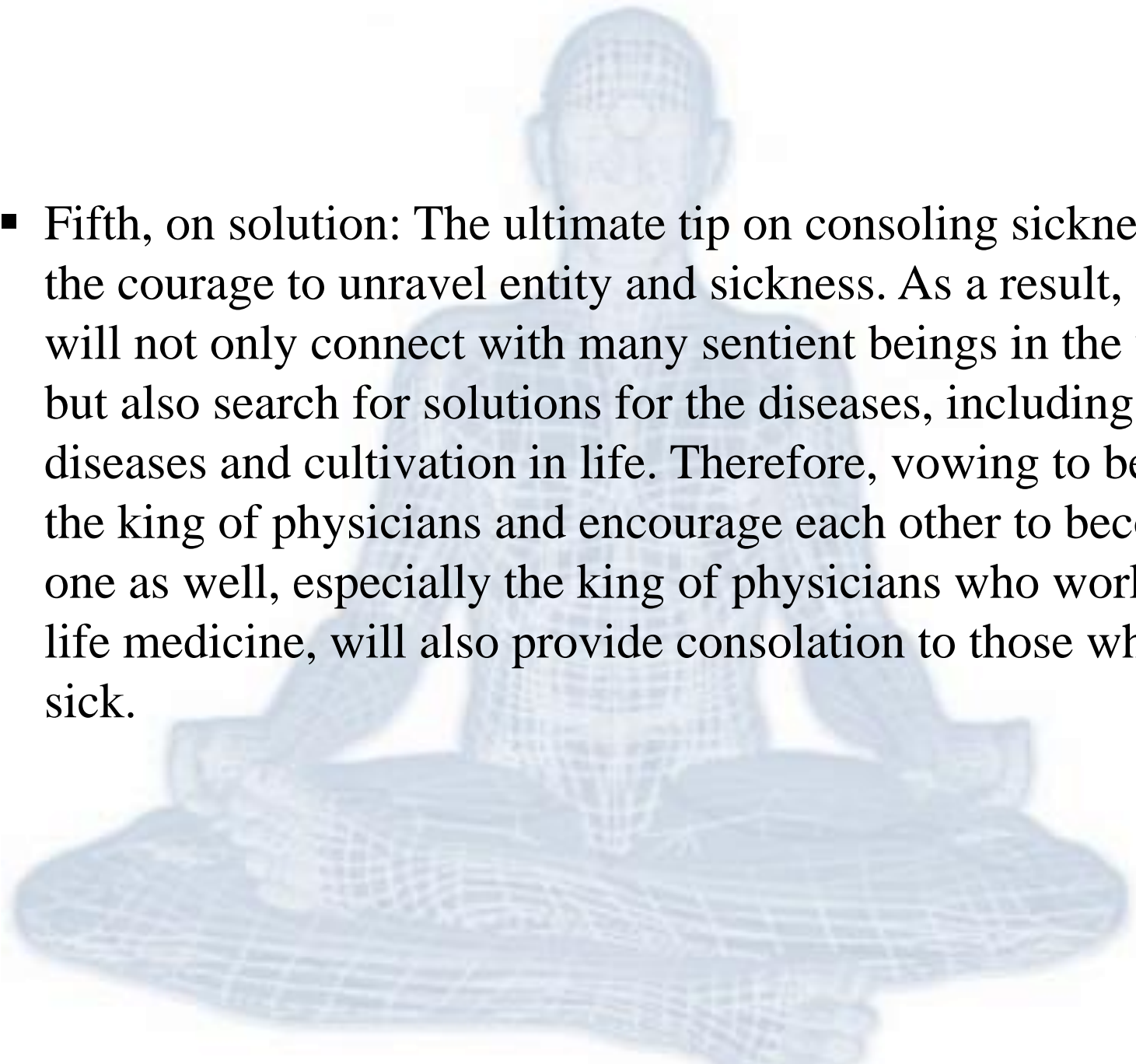
- It is inevitable to get sick during the practice on the Path to Enlightenment. As a result, there is no need to complain or to blow it out of proportion; nor should one avoid it intentionally or try to hide it.
- First of all, the practice on the Path to Enlightenment has to happen in the life world and go through in and out of the life journey. Since the life journey is sutured together with segments of birth, aging, sickness, and death, getting sick is part of the life journey.
- Second of all, one of the tasks the advanced Bodhisattva has at the higher level of the Path to Enlightenment is to guide and transform sentient beings in a grand scope and persistently with an ever-emerging compassion toward all sentient beings trapped in the flow of life and death. Sentient beings ride the flow of the life journey with little control due to their pursuit of the life world. Consequently, the Bodhisattvas who guide and transform sentient beings get sick during the course of the practice.

(V.2) Consolation in Relation to the Bodhisattva's Practices

- Sickness is only a transitory segment of the life journey consisting of birth, aging, sickness, and death; it is not the problem itself. The problem lies in oblivion to the context of sickness, disordered emotions derived out of the diseases, and entrapment inside the diseases.
- The chapter “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness” serves as a demonstration teaching Bodhisattvas how to console another Bodhisattva in sicknesses.
- In the chapter “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness,” as the head who went to visit, Mañjuśrī expounded the following five key points in consolation: emotion, cognition, sentient beings, learning, and solutions.

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- First, on emotion: What consolation can offer is that, on the one hand, one should avoid at all cost falling into the chaotic panic or covet. On the other hand, one should maintain one's mind in the undefiled and fresh state prior to any emotions added.
 - Second, on cognition: Diseases, birth, aging, and death are the organic and primary teachers in the life world. They are better than the summation of all theories and sure will win over all the professional teachers in the world. Therefore, while being sick, what consolation can offer is that, one should consider the sickness as a teacher to observe and perceive what are happening alive in the world well.

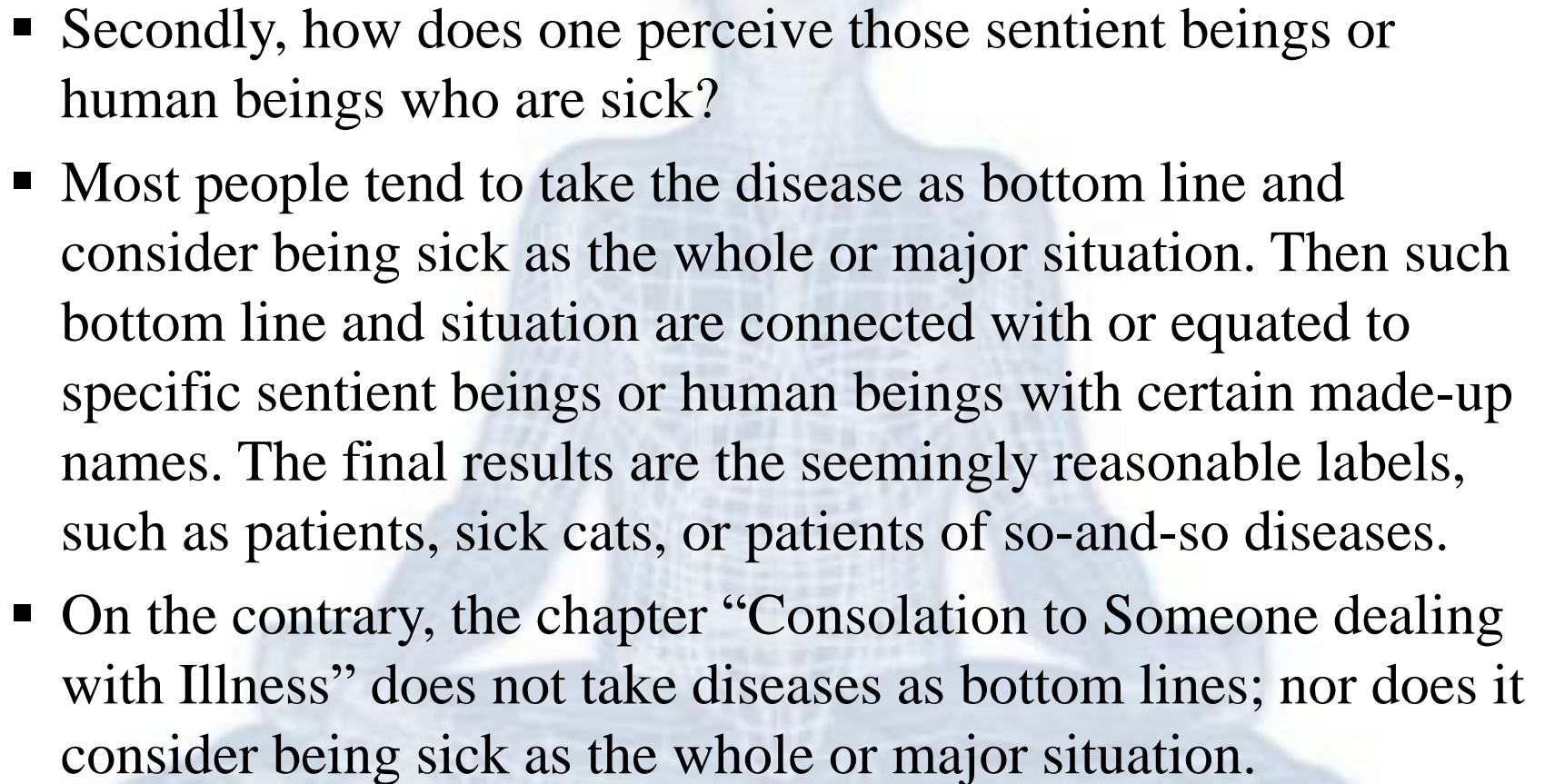
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- Third, on sentient beings: Since sickness does not only happen to one single individual, there is no reason to pity oneself for being sick. Actively, what consolation can offer is that, one should observe that there are many other sentient beings who are also sick. In addition, after experiencing sickness personally, one will be more empathetic and sympathetic to the afflictions sentient beings suffer from diseases. Consequently, one will be motivated to understand and cure diseases.
 - Fourth, on learning: One of the foundational spirits of the Bodhisattva's practices is to realize that one has to practice the thoroughgoing life cultivation through borrowing the life journey and using it to the full extent. By doing so, one can switch from the life journey full of birth, aging, diseases and death, to the thoroughgoing learning on the path of cultivation.

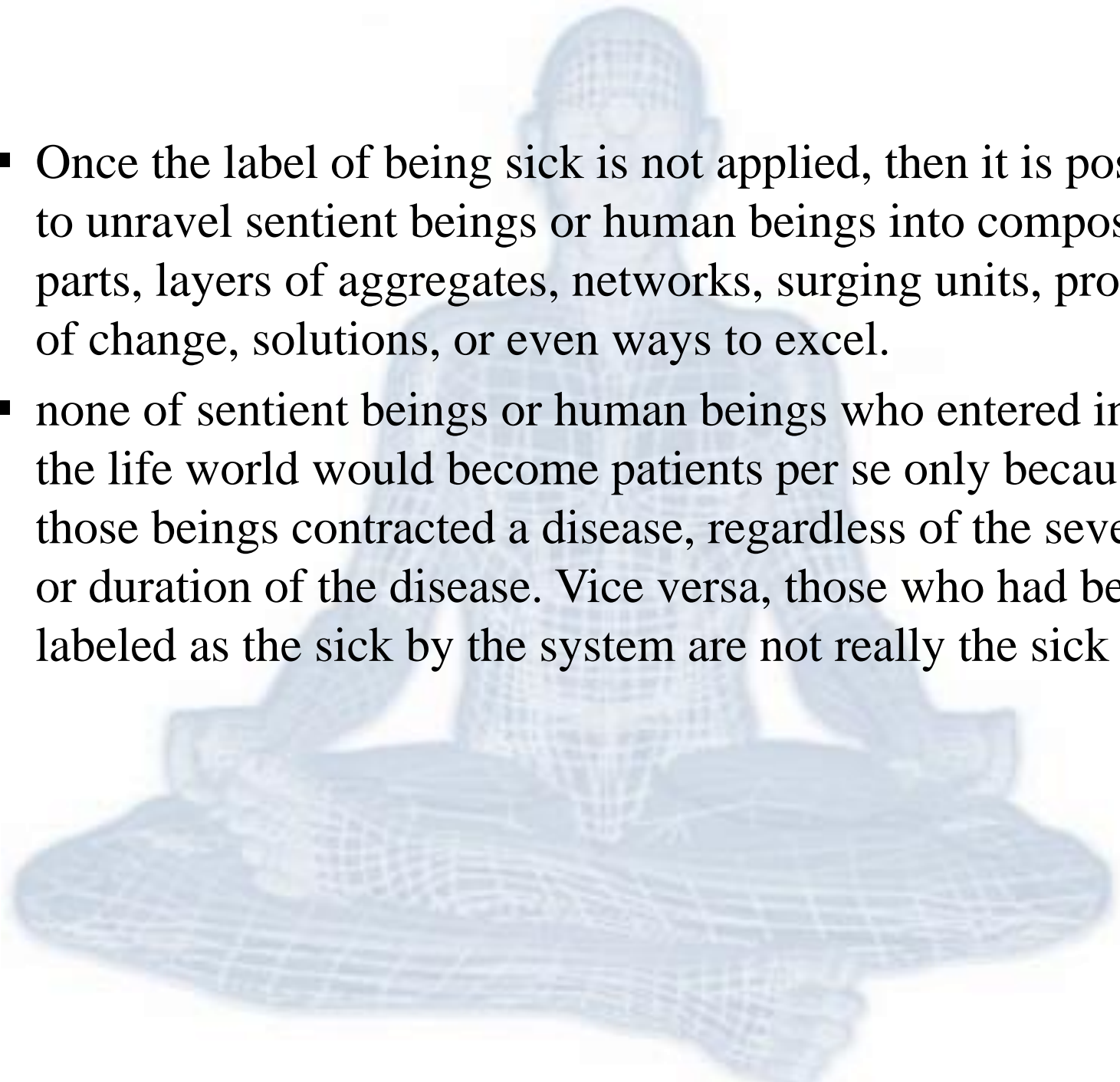
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- Fifth, on solution: The ultimate tip on consoling sickness is the courage to unravel entity and sickness. As a result, one will not only connect with many sentient beings in the world, but also search for solutions for the diseases, including curing diseases and cultivation in life. Therefore, vowing to become the king of physicians and encourage each other to become one as well, especially the king of physicians who works on life medicine, will also provide consolation to those who are sick.

(V.3) Pacifying Those Who Are Sick in Relation to the Bodhisattva's Practices

- After Mañjuśrī expounded the main points in consolation, Vimalakīrti who was sick followed suit and elucidated some key points on how to pacify sicknesses. There are more than diseases in this world; and diseases are not the devils that devour the world, either.
- The kernel during the conversation lies in the shift from sickness to the Bodhisattva's practices. One of the keys to this shift is to actively and positively do things, especially the life medical activities, rather than merely receiving professional medical treatment passively, or waiting for people's consolation on disease.

- First of all, how shall one perceive diseases?
- In general, most people would grasp some specific symptoms, problems, locations, existences, or units and give them some specific names to the diseases and then impose those names onto those so-called patients. Under this context, it seems those patients can only receive professional medical treatments or manipulation.
- However, the chapter “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness” points out that one does not need to impose any thing that does not the right spot, is half-baked, or any stale theory on oneself; nor should one be stuck in any state, nature, matter, or name. On the contrary, one should be as fluid as the running cloud or flowing water to observe the arising and disappearing, as well as the coming and leaving of the diseases first handedly.
- Once comprehended the process of causes and conditions of the so-called disease, one can even boldly make assertion on the so-called disease to be *a-bhūta* (unreal) and *a-sat* (nonexistent).

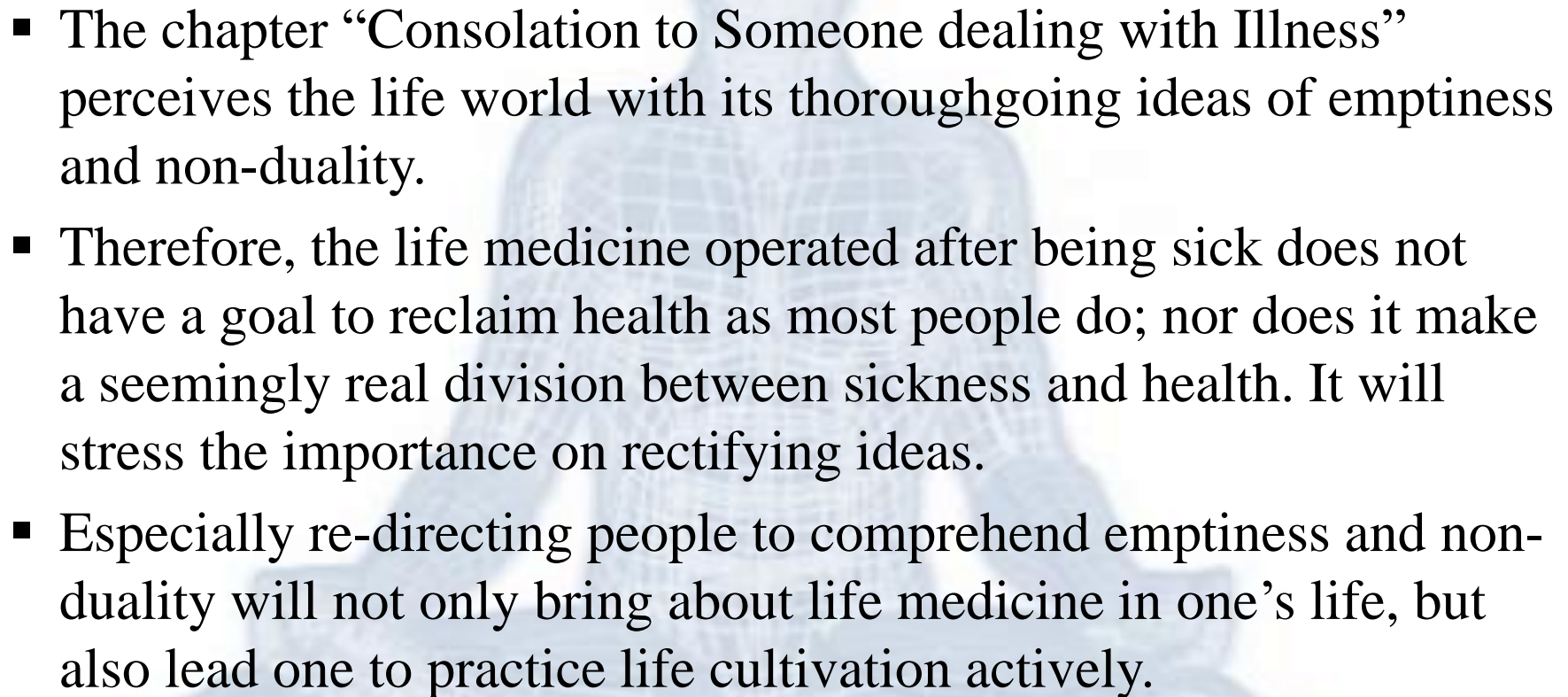
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- Secondly, how does one perceive those sentient beings or human beings who are sick?
 - Most people tend to take the disease as bottom line and consider being sick as the whole or major situation. Then such bottom line and situation are connected with or equated to specific sentient beings or human beings with certain made-up names. The final results are the seemingly reasonable labels, such as patients, sick cats, or patients of so-and-so diseases.
 - On the contrary, the chapter “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness” does not take diseases as bottom lines; nor does it consider being sick as the whole or major situation.

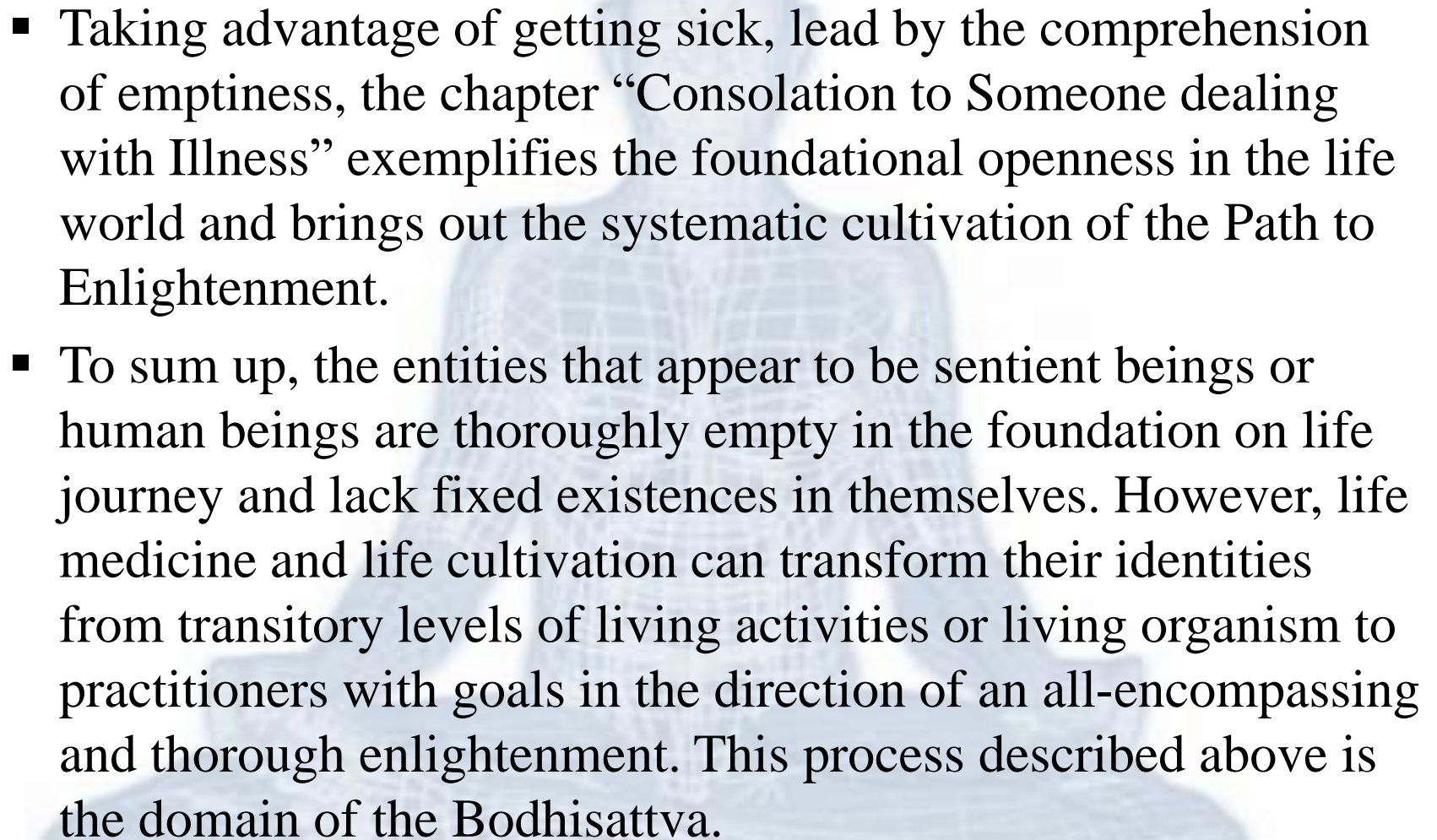
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- Once the label of being sick is not applied, then it is possible to unravel sentient beings or human beings into composing parts, layers of aggregates, networks, surging units, process of change, solutions, or even ways to excel.
 - none of sentient beings or human beings who entered into the life world would become patients per se only because those beings contracted a disease, regardless of the severity or duration of the disease. Vice versa, those who had been labeled as the sick by the system are not really the sick per se.

- Consequently, contrary to most people's recognition, the chapter "Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness" is not locked on the so-called sick sentient beings or human beings; nor does it consider sentient beings or human beings as the bottom line on existence.
- This insight that sentient beings or human beings are not sentient beings or human beings in themselves shows that what entered into the life world is not any specific entity with a fixed existence in itself.
- Rather, what entered into the life world is the on-going life journey composed of the deliberation, cognition, and agitated sentiments of state of mind, as well as attachments in attitude for a extremely long period of time that result in manifestations of the ever-changing combinations in physical and mental states as well as various diseases in the physical and mental states.

(V.4) The Domain of the Bodhisattva under the Context of Sickness

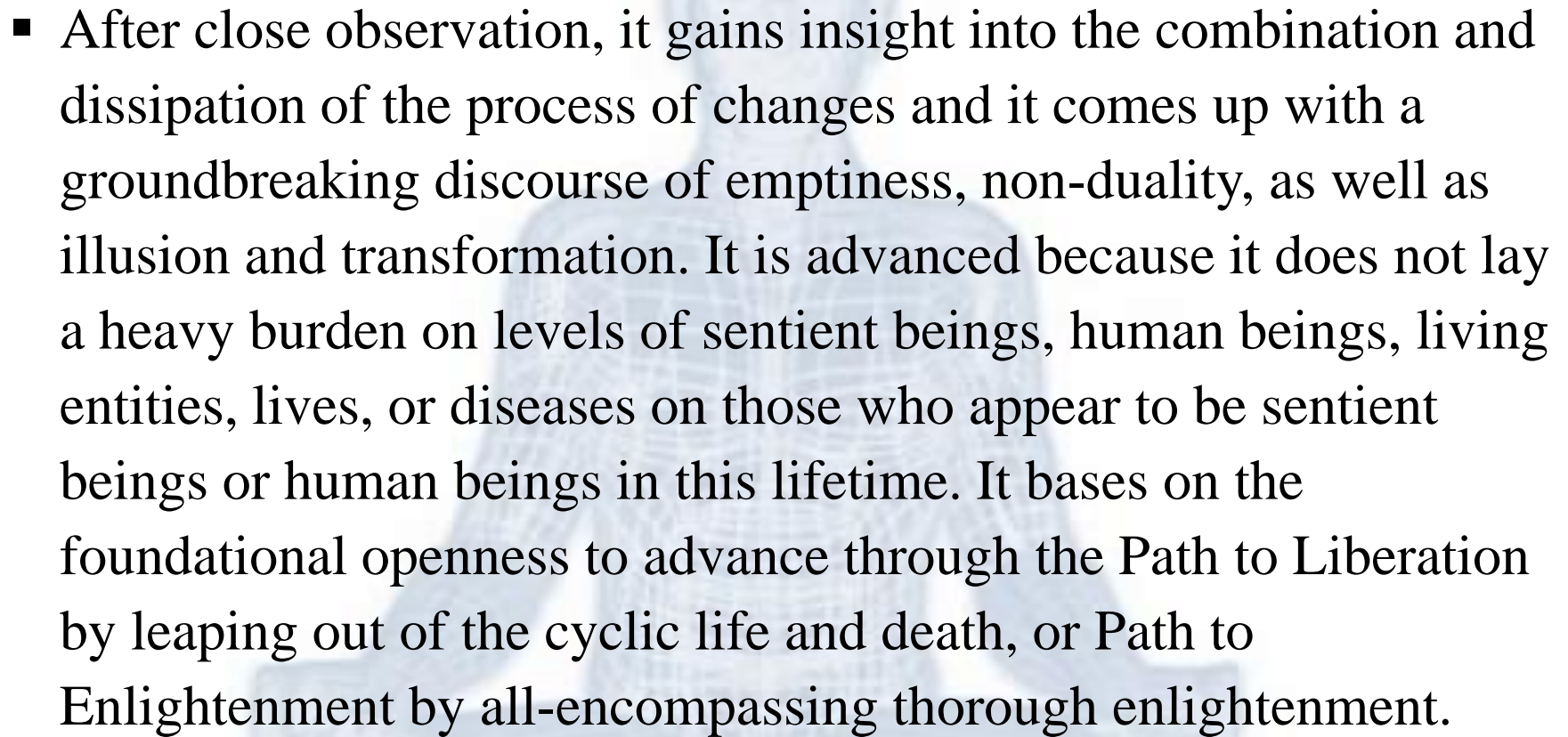
- Even though sentient beings or human beings experience discomforts, pains or irritations, being sick is indeed a great opportunity to raise questions as well as to be alert and to clarify all the entangled problems in the life world.
- If one does not beg for spiritual mercy from the conventional medical treatments; nor does one believe the medicines and the medical institution blindly yet disregard the realities of diseases and pain like the camel burying its head under the sand, then one is ready to unfold the life medicine with pacifying diseases as clues.

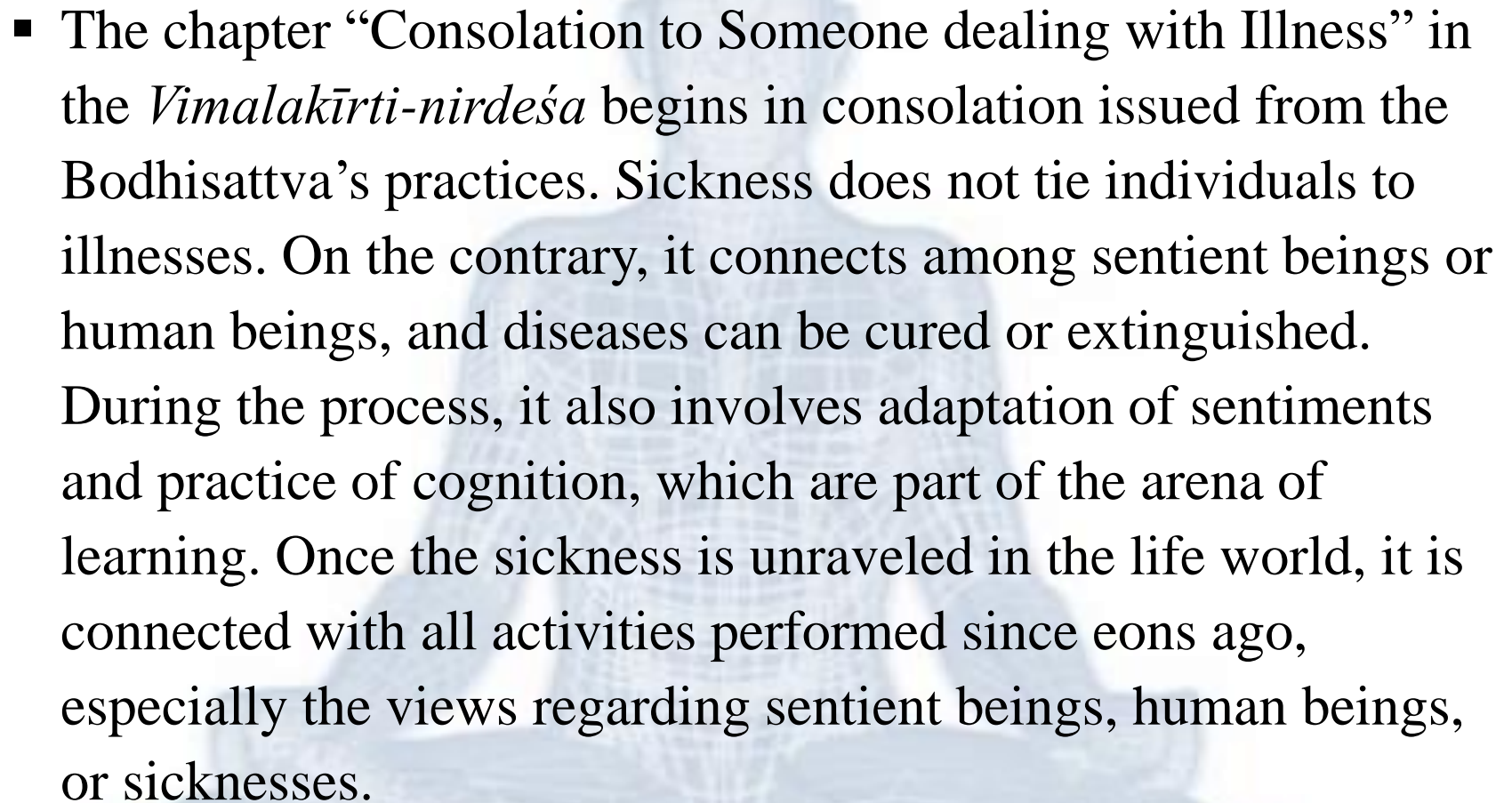
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- The chapter “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness” perceives the life world with its thoroughgoing ideas of emptiness and non-duality.
 - Therefore, the life medicine operated after being sick does not have a goal to reclaim health as most people do; nor does it make a seemingly real division between sickness and health. It will stress the importance on rectifying ideas.
 - Especially re-directing people to comprehend emptiness and non-duality will not only bring about life medicine in one’s life, but also lead one to practice life cultivation actively.

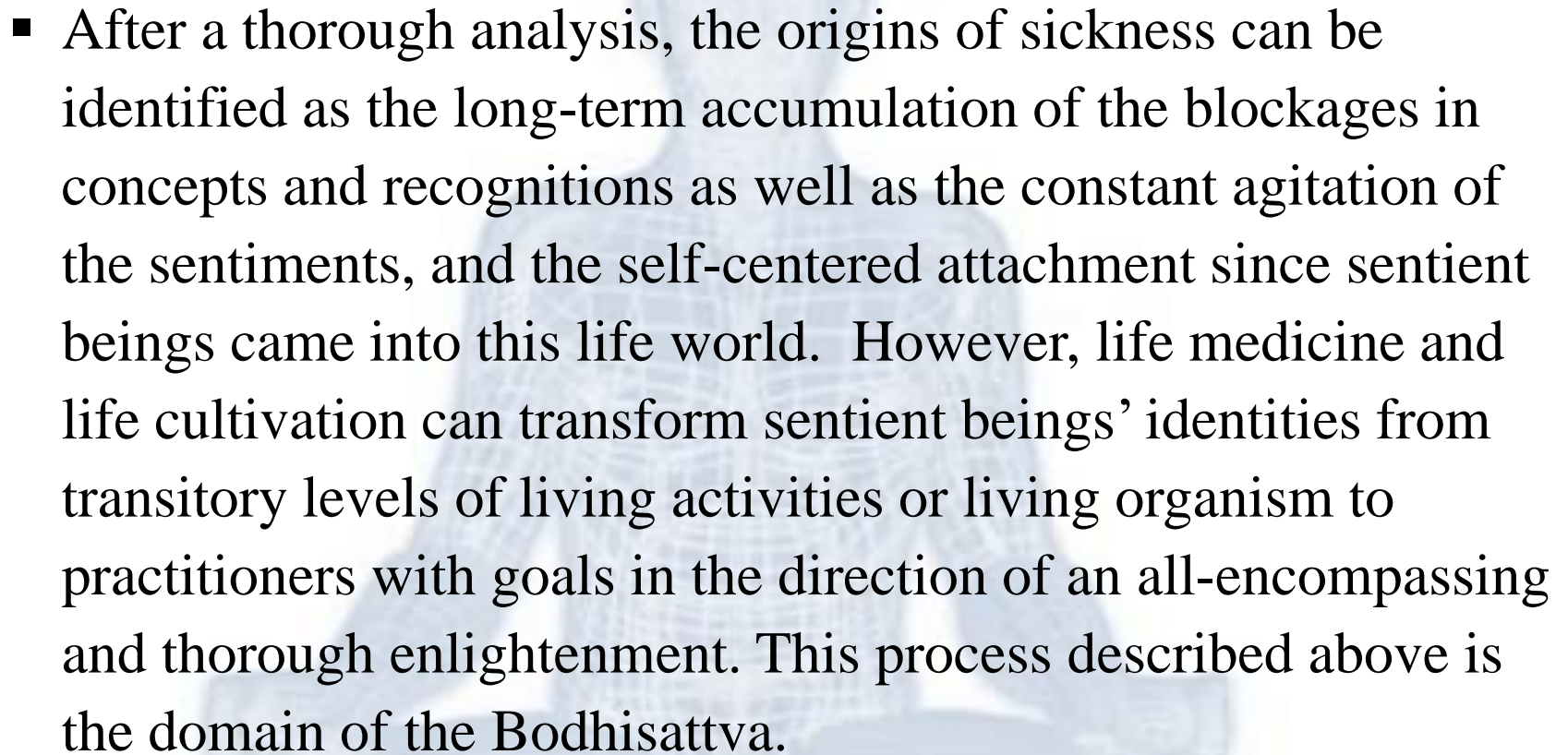
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- Taking advantage of getting sick, lead by the comprehension of emptiness, the chapter “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness” exemplifies the foundational openness in the life world and brings out the systematic cultivation of the Path to Enlightenment.
 - To sum up, the entities that appear to be sentient beings or human beings are thoroughly empty in the foundation on life journey and lack fixed existences in themselves. However, life medicine and life cultivation can transform their identities from transitory levels of living activities or living organism to practitioners with goals in the direction of an all-encompassing and thorough enlightenment. This process described above is the domain of the Bodhisattva.

VI. Conclusion

- Buddhist teachings concerning what life journey, contents of life, and paths out of suffering can offer on life medicine and life cultivation leave us a corpus of abundant, insightful, and highly advanced doctrine and religious practices. Its profusion lies in the scope of its view encompassing the whole life world. It leaps out of the process of birth, aging, sickness and death to establish the Path to Liberation and the Path to Enlightenment as solutions. It is insightful because it does not stop at appearances. It does not take the current states of sentient beings or human beings for granted; nor does it get stuck in the naming of sentient beings or human beings. Rather, it unravels the appearances of sentient beings or human beings in this lifetime into composing parts, sensory bases, perception factors, layers of aggregates, networks of relations, and the thrusting factors.

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- After close observation, it gains insight into the combination and dissipation of the process of changes and it comes up with a groundbreaking discourse of emptiness, non-duality, as well as illusion and transformation. It is advanced because it does not lay a heavy burden on levels of sentient beings, human beings, living entities, lives, or diseases on those who appear to be sentient beings or human beings in this lifetime. It bases on the foundational openness to advance through the Path to Liberation by leaping out of the cyclic life and death, or Path to Enlightenment by all-encompassing thorough enlightenment.

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- The chapter “Consolation to Someone dealing with Illness” in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* begins in consolation issued from the Bodhisattva’s practices. Sickness does not tie individuals to illnesses. On the contrary, it connects among sentient beings or human beings, and diseases can be cured or extinguished. During the process, it also involves adaptation of sentiments and practice of cognition, which are part of the arena of learning. Once the sickness is unraveled in the life world, it is connected with all activities performed since eons ago, especially the views regarding sentient beings, human beings, or sicknesses.

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- After a thorough analysis, the origins of sickness can be identified as the long-term accumulation of the blockages in concepts and recognitions as well as the constant agitation of the sentiments, and the self-centered attachment since sentient beings came into this life world. However, life medicine and life cultivation can transform sentient beings' identities from transitory levels of living activities or living organism to practitioners with goals in the direction of an all-encompassing and thorough enlightenment. This process described above is the domain of the Bodhisattva.



Questions
or
comments?

Thanks for your attention.