

The Heart Sutra
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Good evening everyone. Some of the sutras we chanted tonight were a bit different because for the last five years or so, I've been involved in something we call the Liturgy Project with a couple of my colleagues and co-conspirators in California, John Tarrant and Rich Domingue. John and I do the book and Richie does the music. When we get a couple of new things done we change them as we did this time with the Hakuin, which is a retranslation, and the Kanzeon (Guanyin) chant, which is a new translation altogether of the Japanese. If you are interested in the liturgy, at the back of each of the sutra books now is a section which includes some introductory material about each of the pieces of the liturgy, which might be a good place to start. Also, during the retreat that began my residency, I gave some talks on the new Hakuin and the Kanzeon chant. So if those are interesting to you, you might want to find out about getting tapes of that. Transcripts will be available in the coming weeks or months.

I thought that we'd spend tonight with perhaps the chewiest of all of the sutras in our liturgy, which is the Maha Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra. If you want to take a look at that while I am speaking, it's on page 1-2.

The prajnaparamita sutras, which means 'scriptures of the great insight that reaches the other shore,' developed around the beginning of the common era, about two thousand years ago. It was the second great wave of the development of Buddhist philosophy. The prajnaparamita literature is literally voluminous, comprising six hundred volumes. When that literature moved from India to China, it took two thousand monastics and two thousand lay people one year to translate those six hundred volumes from Sanskrit to Chinese. They said that while they were working the peach blossoms bloomed six times through the year.

This chant is called the Heart Sutra for short, in the sense that it is the heart of all of those six hundred volumes of prajnaparamita literature. They are condensed and distilled into this extremely potent, relatively short chant. *Prajna* is a Sanskrit word and is often translated as wisdom, but I want to make a discrimination here; I think a better translation for prajna is

insight, because it refers to a kind of penetrating clarity that comes with meditation. It's an ability to see clearly and quickly, and make a quick judgment. In meditation, we rediscover an innate, intuitive connection with the vastness, and the nature of that connection is prajna. It's not like a skill we learn or something we add on, but actually something that is innate in us, that we rediscover through meditation.

It's interesting that in this sutra the person who is practicing this prajnaparamita, this perfected form of insight, is Avalokiteshvara, who is the bodhisattva, the embodiment, of compassion. In the "Guanyin Sutra of Endless Life," Guanyin is the Chinese version of Avalokiteshvara. Kanzeon, which we use in the chant, is the Japanese version. So Avalokiteshvara, Guanyin, and Kanzeon are the same being of wandering gender — sometimes masculine, sometimes feminine — who was considered the embodiment of compassion. I think it's important that it is compassion that is doing this meditation.

We get wisdom when the insight that comes from meditation meets compassion. Here's the bodhisattva of compassion doing this insight meditation. Out of that alchemy comes wisdom. Wisdom needs both parts, the warmth as well as the clarity. There is a lovely echo of that in the fact that prajnaparamita, this perfection of insight, came to be personified as the Mother of All the Buddhas. You can see that metaphorically, that this insight would be the Mother of Awakening. She also became a goddess; there are images of Prajna Paramita. The insight gestates in the womb of this female figure, and from that comes wisdom; out of that is born the buddhas. Wisdom is a combination of a clear mind and an open heart.

Sometimes you'll see people whose prajna leaps way out ahead of their compassion. They have tremendous insight and are very clear, but they don't have the open heart yet to go with that. Sometimes that clarity can feel like a knife to them. It doesn't feel good : They can see everything, they can understand everybody's stuff, they can be clear about what's going on around them, but there is no warmth in it. There is no understanding, no give about how we all are as human beings. It can be a painful place until the compassion catches up and the two come together.

In the term prajnaparamita, if prajna is insight, *paramita* means 'gone to the other shore.' We can gloss that as the highest attainment of, the perfection of, the completion of. There is something beautiful in the image, a sense that our ordinary heart-minds, and our ordinary lives, can be like roiling seas. They can be choppy, full of big waves and storms, and tiring to

swim. Currents can ripple through them like waves rippling over vast sections of the ocean. Karmic currents, events, and moments in history go rippling through this ocean. The cultivation of prajna was seen as like a boat that picks you up and carries you across this roiling sea of our ordinary minds and lives, and takes us to the shore on the other side. We have been talking for awhile, about Elaine Scarry's idea of being thrown up out of the water onto a merciful beach, so that all of that roiling, uncomfortable, aggressive, painful stuff is receding like the waves receding off the beach. We're there in the warm sand, safe for the moment, from all of that.

In the first part of the *Heart Sutra*, you have a kind of introduction, which is the whole thing in a nutshell. It's the heart of the *Heart Sutra* :

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, practicing deep prajnaparamita,
clearly saw that all five *skandhas* are empty,
transforming all suffering and distress.

The practitioner is Avalokiteshvara, which is to say that the practitioner is you. Whether you believe it or not. You are Avalokiteshvara, there is no other bodhisattva of compassion but you, in your hands and your warmth and your heart and the things you do. What's being cultivated by you is deep prajnaparamita, the insight that happens with meditation. The practice of cultivating that deep insight is to clearly see the emptiness of things. That's what seeing that all five *skandhas* are empty means. I'll come back to the skandhas, but the meaning is seeing the emptiness of everything. The practice is inquiry, over and over looking and wondering and asking, and in that way seeing the empty nature of everything.

Empty nature doesn't mean illusory or nonexistent, but that nothing is independent of everything else. Nothing stands by itself; everything is connected. We have the sense of things being separate, but underneath we are actually all connected. Empty means empty of self nature. Empty of separateness. Empty of standing alone. The practitioner is cultivating this insight through the practice of seeing the emptiness of things, and the result is "transforming all suffering and distress." Not a promise that there will be no suffering and distress, but a promise that it will be different, that our relationship with it will feel different.

The skandhas were one of the brilliant parts of early buddhist philosophy and psychology, which are beginning to be appreciated in terms of how people now see things through neuroscience, philosophy, and cognitive studies. Skandha literally means a heap. A pile of

stuff, an aggregate. Things aren't separate independent; everything is a combination of these heaps. We look at those heaps and create a self out of them. I create a 'you' out of the heaps. But actually, if you investigate, there is no self there. There is only the accumulation of these things.

So the five heaps out of which everything is made is form, which is matter, the physical part of everything; sensations, which is acquiring data through sense organs and then evaluating it as feeling pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; perceptions, which is conceptualizing about the sensations, which leads us to thinking about things; mental activities, which includes intentions that have karmic results — things like attention, will, desire, hatred, and concentration; and finally consciousness, which is defined as an awareness of the other four.

Everything in the universe is made up of those heaps, and those heaps are always changing by circumstance and the influences of neighboring heaps. It's not like you're the same five heaps your whole life; they're always changing, rising and falling like sand dunes. Sand gets brought in and then the wind blows it away, so the shape is always changing. We get older, we get dumber, whatever. Our great folly as human minds is to think there is a self that somehow connects all of that.

We begin to see that the world is made of sand dunes. We begin to see that nothing is separate, everything is connected in this fundamental way. Then our attitude toward things changes. Things can still hurt, there still might be pain and distress, but we don't suffer about it in quite the same way. There is a little bit more spaciousness. There is a little bit of an ability to accept what's going on without wishing it were other, because the fundamental nature of suffering is wishing it were different from what it is. *I don't want to be doing this ... If it doesn't change, I'm not going to be able to bear it.* That is suffering. When someone dies and we grieve, that is pain but it's not suffering. If someone you love dies, what would you rather be doing? Isn't what you can give, in that circumstance, your grief? But if you don't want to grieve, if you don't want to admit that this has happened, that the world has changed in this fundamental way, then you suffer. Because you are vibrating against what's going on. That's the distinction we begin to be able to see with prajna.

The language of the *Heart Sutra* can be pretty high, full of grand statements and big ideas. I wanted to give a bit of the sense of the Chinese tradition, because the Chinese are so good about blending high concepts with nitty-gritty applications. This is a teacher called Hanshan

Deqing, from the Ming dynasty, 400 or 500 years ago. The language is a little antiquated but stick with it because you'll see that quality. He said :

If we people were only able to carry out a contemplation like this one, if we in a single thought suddenly awoke to the fundamentally-existent light of wisdom inhering in our own minds, if we experienced a vast, great, and numinous penetrating understanding like this, utterly illuminating the original emptiness of the five aggregates and the nonexistence of the four great elements, what suffering would we not thereby transcend? Moreover, what further dragging along and tying up by accumulated karmic activity could there be? What forceful argumentation over others and self, right and wrong, could there be?

He brings it right down. All this high-faluting stuff has nothing to do with us; it really has everything to do with how we argue about self and other and right and wrong, how we're always judging and having opinions and disagreeing with ourselves about things.

What comparative scheming over misfortune and fortune, success and failure could there be? How could there be anything in the realm of wealth and poverty, nobility and humble station which could bother our minds?

This is really about our lives, about us. So much of this from centuries ago is familiar to us in our own concerns.

That was the introductory part of the sutra, and now we get into the body of it, which is about explaining the practice and describing the experience of prajna in meditation. In this section Avalokiteshvara, kind as he is, comes out of his meditation and addresses Shariputra. Shariputra was one of the ten great disciples of the Buddha; he was considered first in wisdom. The name Shariputra is beautiful; it means 'son of the egret.' In the Indian view, the egret was a particularly clear-eyed, wise bird. Anybody who has spent any time with egrets knows that they also do a meditation in which they stand in the marsh for hours, unblinking and unmoving. So Avalokiteshvara, our compassionate nature, is speaking to Shariputra, the part of us that has insight, the part of us that thinks it knows something.

The first thing he says is : Form is no other than emptiness, and emptiness no other than form.

Again, emptiness doesn't mean a void that has nothing in it. Emptiness is the whole universe, what physicists would call the plenum, which is all of that vast space and everything it contains, including all of the potential. So it's a fullness as much as an emptiness. What it's

empty of is the separateness of things. Form, matter, stuff is no different from that. They are not different from each other, although they appear to be.

Here's a way to think about that : The Chinese character they chose to translate the Sanskrit word for 'emptiness' means 'the vast sky.' Another meaning for the character that's used for 'form' is 'color.' It's as though we were talking about the sky and the color of the sky. How inseparable is that? The color of the sky might change; it might be different on different days depending on the weather, and on different planets, heaven knows, it's probably different colors altogether. But the inextricability of the sky and the color of the sky is like the relationship between form and emptiness, and between us and the vastness.

One of the old Chinese teachers had a wonderful image. When he was talking about people's tendencies to pick one or the other, to think that form is more important or, mostly in a buddhist context, that emptiness is more important. He said they are like two hitching posts, and we hitch ourselves up to one or the other — picking a post and tying ourselves to it, taking a stand there. But really we shouldn't tether ourselves to one or the other.

Then Avalokiteshvara says the same thing :

Form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form

and then we go into the list :

Sensation, perception, mental reaction, consciousness
are also like this.

This list is one of the formulations of the five skandhas. He's just repeating that the five skandhas are empty; they are both form and emptiness simultaneously.

All things are essentially empty. Not born, not destroyed,
not stained not pure, without loss, without gain.

There are two meanings here. One is the grand sense, that the ultimate truth about phenomena doesn't fall into any kind of duality. And then there is also another more human way to look at that, which is that this is what we do with our discriminating minds. Does it exist, does it not exist? Is it corrupt? Is it pure? Is it gaining? Is it losing? Is this a good thing? Is this a bad thing? He is saying that essential nature has nothing to do with the categorizing

that goes on in our minds all the time. All of those ways we judge and evaluate things are meaningless when it comes to the essential nature of things.

In emptiness there are no five skandhas :

no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind;
no color, sound, smell, taste, touch, object of thought,
no seeing and so on to no thinking,
no ignorance and also no ending of ignorance.

There are no sensory organs. In other words, there is no self. There is no color, sound, smell, taste, touch. There is nothing being perceived. There is no subject, no object. There is nothing we are experiencing. And then there is no field of experience. There is no seeing. And where it says, "and so on," it's sparing you the entire list. But what that would be is no seeing, no hearing, no smelling, no tasting, touching. It just avoids the repetition.

Even though there is none of this, we keep attaching to it. We keep attaching to a sense of self, a sense of other, a self-perception. Then Avalokiteshvara goes into another list that he doesn't give you all of, which is:

no ignorance and no ending of ignorance,
and so on to no old age and death,
and also no ending of old age and death.

That's the chain of dependent origination. That's how things happen, one thing leading to another. Our ignorance leads to our doing stuff and making karma. Karma leads to consciousness. Consciousness leads to body and mind. Body and mind lead to the six senses. The six senses leads to contacting things. Contact leads to sensation, to the feeling of what's that like. Sensation leads to craving. Craving leads to grasping, and so on. That is the endless chain of things, which we're caught up in. And Avalokiteshvara is saying that none of it actually exists, none of it.

No suffering, cause of suffering, cessation, path

You might recognize these as the Four Noble Truths; even they don't exist.

No wisdom and no attainment.

One of the ways to look at this long list of no's, all the things Avalokiteshvara is saying aren't real, is this : If you fall passionately in love with somebody, you probably don't think to yourself, 'I get this great rush of endorphins whenever I see her.' ... 'His face fits the perfect proportions known since classical times to be beautiful.' ... 'She has the correct waist to hip ratio for childbearing.' All those things might be true, but they're not it. They might be part of it, but you're not going to understand love by examining hip to waist ratios.

There is some quality of this in Avalokiteshvara's no's. Just throw away all the ways you try to think about reality. Throw away all the ways you try to organize and figure it out. You are not going to be able to figure it out, but there is a direct experience in meditation that has nothing to do with any of these "Six Thats" and "Fourteen Thises," and all the other categories.

When Avalokiteshvara says, "no wisdom and no attainment," there's a quality that's like the Chinese *wu wei*, which is often translated as 'non-action.' That's not quite what it means; it's more 'empty action.' It's action that's empty of motivation and intention; it's spontaneous and responding to things. In that sense, empty wisdom and empty attainment, which would be another way to translate this phrase, is something like wisdom without any big ideas about what wisdom is, and practice without any big ideas of attaining, and what we might be attaining.

If you lose all the categories, there's no hindrance in the mind. Everything you think you know, let it go, because that is not prajna. And when you do let that go, you find yourself in this natural state of prajnaparamita. Again, it's not a skill we develop or something we add. It's what we discover when we let everything else fall away.

Since there is nothing to attain, or lose, or accumulate, we are not any longer living by getting and spending, by trying to figure out who's winning and who's losing. We're not even anxious about living and dying. And when we aren't, that's freedom. When we aren't in that constant state of accumulating and letting go, everything is liberation. We often talk about how meditation is a deconstructive process, and this is what we mean. This is a way of deconstructing our ideas about things, even our good and salutary ideas about the Four Noble

Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the twelve links in the Chain of Dependent Origination. When we let even all of that go we find this natural state of prajna, this natural state of having a mind that is open to the vastness. When we let go of hindrance, what is true becomes visible.

Perhaps the most touching promise is that when the hindrances go, there is no fear. Somehow when things get simple, when things drop away, fear drops away, too. That state of not being afraid is what freedom is. This is something we just viscerally know. If I weren't afraid, that would be freedom.

Right here is nirvana.

Nirvana is another word that's lying on a gurney somewhere attached to tubes and monitors. Forget everything you think about nirvana. It's actually a simple thing, just perfect stillness. The ocean has calmed down; it's not rippling, just calm and smooth. There is a wonderful etymological association with nirvana : It comes from the same root as a word that means the coolness that happens after a fever breaks. Another way to think about the roiling sea of life is as a fever. We toss and turn, it's hot, the sheets feel like granite, and then the fever breaks. There is that simple, cool feeling that comes when the fever goes. That is nirvana, the cool after a fever.

All the buddhas are hanging out in prajnaparamita and are attaining *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*, which means unsurpassed perfect awakening. No big deal. Then in the last section the sutra does an interesting and strange thing. Avalokiteshvara has been talking almost cognitively about this, in an explicit and exoteric way. The sutra takes a turn and all of a sudden we're doing a mantram, and it's in another language and we don't even know what it means.

Why? Where did the mantra come from? The first and largest part of the sutra is an open explication of the doctrine of prajna. But the mantram is the esoteric experience, the thing you can't explain. So there is no explanation. There are nice things we said about it; it's highly praised. This is, I think, to remind us that prajna is fundamentally a mystery. It's not something we can get out our notebooks and our slide rules — Does anybody use slide rules anymore? — our computers and linear accelerators, and figure out. There is something

mysterious about it, something that happens in the alchemy between insight and compassion inside. There is a gestation and a giving birth, no matter your wandering gender. That is summed up in this mantram. So we say the mantram in Sanskrit as a way of saying that there is a part of this that can't be explained. There is a part of this that we can't even talk about, but we can gesture toward it in saying this mantram together.

Gone gone, gone beyond, to the other shore,
awakening fulfilled. Oh great joy!

from the Qe3A

JIS : I think the fundamental message is pretty simple, which is that none of your ideas about this mean anything. Prajna is not intellectual understanding. There is an old Daoist saying that knowledge is about getting day after day; wisdom is about letting go day after day. The less you are certain of, the fewer theories, schemes, and diagrams you have about how things are, the better. Because the idea here is that that stuff will get in the way, will be a hindrance to this fundamental experience of the natural state of your mind. Prajna is the natural state of your mind. We fill our minds with all this stuff, and that gets in the way.