

The Heart Sutra, Introductory Talk
Joan Sutherland
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Ann mentioned that two and a half weeks ago Richie Domingue died. He was a musician — his picture is on the altar now — and he did the music part of the Liturgy Project that John Tarrant, Richie, and I worked on. The gift of his music was and will be extraordinary. The gift of his friendship and the gift of his Dharma are incalculable. John said of him, “Richie’s the biggest dead person I know.”

I couldn’t think of a truer and deeper way to honor his friendship and his Dharma than to go deeply into the *Heart Sutra* in this retreat. That was the last thing he did and the last big piece of the Liturgy Project. He unveiled it literally a couple of days before he died. He had asked that nobody record it because it was still rough, but fortunately someone recorded it anyway and so we have a recording of it. He taught it that day as a call and response. Tomorrow in the sutra service we’ll be playing that and responding to Richie’s call.

That’s one way we’ll be looking at the *Heart Sutra*. We’ll be looking at it in a number of other ways in the talks. The koans this time are about the *Heart Sutra* or about the themes of the *Heart Sutra* in some way. We’ll have a chance to begin with that tonight.

I’d like to begin with our questions about it. I’m going to start with a few of my own and then we will just speak the *Heart Sutra* together and then go into meditation with it. Think about what your questions, thoughts, or feelings are about this sutra. We’ll have a chance to say those and [speaking of the meditation hall floor] drop them into this great dark earth that we sit around in this hall.

Let me start with a few questions of my own to drop into the earth. The first is : Why of all the Prajnaparamita literature, all the wisdom literature of the Mahayana, is this the only one given to us by Avalokiteshvara? All the other ones are given by Manjushri, who is the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. This one is given by compassion itself. Why is it that the *Heart Sutra* is given to us by compassion itself?

Another question is about how this sutra marks one of the sea changes in this tradition. Before that there was a sense that we practiced, we meditated, with a hope of reaching nirvana, with a hope of finding a separate peace, a peace apart from the difficulties and the struggles of life. With the Prajnaparamita literature it changed, because the desire of the

bodhisattva is to live not in peace, not in nirvana, not in that sense of peace, but in wisdom. So what does it mean to have a desire to live in wisdom rather than a separate peace?

The *Heart Sutra* is very clear that that wisdom is one in and of the world. It needs the world. It doesn't exist without the world. It doesn't exist without relationship. What does it mean to choose a wisdom of the world rather than a separate peace as one's heart's desire?

Another question I have is about that great run of No's in the middle ("no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; no color, sound, taste, touch, object of thought"). Why should it be that this run of No's is so thrilling? What is so exhilarating about it? How is it that all of that deconstruction, all of that *no, no, no, no, no* ends up feeling like a prayer?

Another question that is intimately related to that one is later on in the *Heart Sutra* when it says, "With no hindrance in the mind, no hindrance and therefore no fear, far beyond delusive thinking, right here is nirvana," *With no hindrance in the mind and therefore no fear* is the great promise of the *Heart Sutra*. It is possible to let those hindrances go, and that's that *No*. That's that great run of No's. If we can do that, automatically fear falls away. When fear falls away nirvana is right here. Nirvana is what is revealed when fear is gone. The promise of Avalokiteshvara in the *Heart Sutra* is that you can do this. You can do this.

The last question I want to drop into the dark earth is one that Richie and I shared. This is really in honor of him because this was so much his question. He would ask, "What gets lost in a tradition whose founding story requires that a man abandon his wife and child? What do we lose with that?" He was thinking in particular about the feminine. He was also thinking about the loss of a unity of daily life and the spiritual life, the beginning of the idea that you had to leave daily life in order to follow the spiritual quest. To him these were two great losses, but that's not where he stopped.

And so Richie's job was to keep asking the questions. I want us to keep asking the questions, and these other questions as well as our own questions, and to explore what if we open that gate back up. What if we undo that spell? What if we invite Yashodhara and Rahula back in? What happens then? So much of what Richie did was about that in one way or another.

That's where I begin, with those questions. You may do with them anything you wish, including completely ignoring them.

I want to close by saying that I feel a deep, wrenching sadness at the loss of Richie. I also feel all the way to the bottom that this is a beautiful world that could throw up somebody like that. If this world is capable of throwing up *mahasattvas* like Richie, maybe there's some hope. Maybe things really will turn out well.

Thank you.