

The Heart Sutra IV
Joan Sutherland
Mountain Cloud Zen Center ~ Santa Fe, New Mexico
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We're going to be keeping company a little while longer with the *Heart Sutra*. Tonight I want to talk about what it might mean — from one perspective anyway — to take refuge in prajna. Prajna is wisdom, a particular kind of wisdom born of meditation and life. Not that those two things are different.

Suzuki Shunryu had a beautiful image about life. He said, "It's as though we're a waterfall. We're all drops of water falling next to each other, and at some point we'll hit the pool at the bottom and return to that." I have a sense that that waterfall doesn't just last the span of a human life or our human lives, but that it stretches from one end of the universe to the other, that we are falling all the way through the universe; life after life after life after life. Here we are in this particular part of the universe, falling together. This world has held out an invitation to us : Come see what life is like in this bit of the universe. Those of us who have bodies, which is most of us here, are here in this bit of the universe experiencing what life is like here.

We quickly find that here it's made up of earth and air, wind and fire, light and dark and everything in between. Love and anger, beauty and sorrow, all of that. It's possible that it's not like that everywhere. It's possible that being a molecule in one of those great interstellar clouds of gas is a completely ecstatic experience. You just surf the currents of the universe, and then every once in a while one of those big clouds of gas bump into each other. Astronomers say that if we could hear it, it would make a sound like chiming.

But it is not thus here. It is not always ecstasy here. It's complicated. If we pick and choose, if we don't accept all of life as it is here in this part of the universe, we're in some way refusing the invitation. We're in some way refusing the opportunity to experience what this kind of life is like. If we say *I'll take the sunsets, but keep your Wal-Mart* [Laughter], that's a kind of stinginess.

In the computer world, if you have something happen that was bound to happen like your hard drive crashes after you haven't backed up for a while, what the computer people will say is : That's a feature, not a bug. [Laughter] Hard drives will crash when you haven't backed up for a while; that's a feature, not a bug.

There's a way in which the complications of life, the difficulties of life, are features. They're not bugs.

One of the ways it becomes more possible not to pick and choose, not to refuse any part of the invitation but to accept all of it, has to do with this sense of taking refuge in prajna.

If we think that suffering is some kind of mistake, that it's a bug instead of a feature, then we're in a fundamental conflict with life about life's nature. We have a complaint against life at a fundamental level. If we don't have that complaint, if we accept that life is complicated and includes difficult stuff as well as tremendous beauty, then all of the energy that might have been bound up in that complaint against life is released. It's released for something else, which is to ask the simple question, *What can we do?*

There's something not stingy, something generous about dropping the complaint against life for being itself and taking that energy instead and saying *It is thus. Now what? What do we do? How can we respond?* In that way, when I talk about accepting life as it is I'm not talking about a resignation at all. I'm talking about the possibility of a real generosity and an engagement with life.

Eleanor Roosevelt used to say, "Most of the work in the world is done by people who weren't feeling very well that day." This gives me tremendous consolation as someone who has spent a lot of days working not feeling very well. I rest in that. I take heart in that. The other thing it does is allow me to feel my common humanity. That's true about most of the world; the women walking miles to collect firewood with blistered feet, the men tilling the fields with fever, the grandmothers knitting as they waste away. That is the human condition. That is human life and I don't want to turn away from that. I don't want to pretend that I am somehow outside of that or that I can ignore that. I join the great river of life when I remember that.

Is there something wrong with tilling the fields while you have a fever? I can't find it. I can't find that that's wrong. It's human life. Can I imagine that it would be easier to till a field without a fever? Yes. Easily. I feel happy when I hear that the Gates Foundation is giving hundreds of millions of dollars to try to eradicate malaria. That makes me happy because I think it would be good if people didn't have to till the fields with fever. That too is human life.

We don't turn away twice. We don't turn away from the fact that there is sickness. We don't turn away from the fact that there is probably something we can do about that.

My bodhichitta, my desire for enlightenment, is a desire for an ease in the world, not for a separate peace away from the world. I want to feel more and more completely at peace with the world as it is so that I don't have to leave the room to be peaceful, so I can stay in the room and know peace. And also, those times when I do need to duck out of the room for a little while, then I'm peaceful with that. I'm at peace with that as well.

I think this is taking refuge in prajna because the kind of prajna we've been talking about during this retreat is inseparable from freedom and from ease in the world. To develop the kind of prajna we've been talking about is to develop a free relationship both with our own hearts, minds, and our inner states and with the things of this world. I want to talk a little bit about how we do that.

How do we free all beings through prajna? How do we take that first bodhisattva vow seriously, to save all beings, to wake all beings, to free all beings? I think that the first part of that is that we have to free the world from our own views about the world. We have to look at our opinions, complaints, desires, and needs for the world to be a certain way and fears that the world *is* a certain way. All of that. Because all of that imprisons the world for us as much as it imprisons us. It imprisons the world too because it so drastically limits the possibilities we can imagine. It so drastically limits what we might do, because it so restricts our freedom. And it's kind. It's generous to let those views go to the extent that we can.

The second thing after we begin to free ourselves from our own views about the world is to try to see the things of the world in a free way.

In the old Chinese commentaries on the *Heart Sutra* they said that you come to know the world in prajna in three ways. The first is by listening to it. We listen to the world, which means we let the things of the world speak for themselves. We don't tell the story for them. In one of the early buddhist sutras it calls attention to letting things speak for themselves instead of interrupting. That's listening to the world, letting things speak for themselves, and not imposing our story on them.

The Chinese text goes on to say that the second way we come to know the world in prajna is through thinking about things. I take thinking about things to mean taking them into consideration, empathizing, putting ourselves in the place of others, trying to imagine what it's like to be another, and working with our own reactions and responses to things.

The third way we know the world besides listening to it and thinking about it is meditating on it. It seems to me that when we take deeply and seriously the things of the world into our meditation, what we do is sit on the bare ground with them and wait. What's possible when we do that is a kind of knowing, perhaps beyond what either we or the thing itself consciously know. We're allowing something else to rise up out of the bare ground, something that we don't know, something that maybe whatever it is we're considering doesn't know either. We allow what we were speaking about last night as the entrance of the inconceivable. The thing not yet understood, the thing that can change everything.

This isn't something that happens like a bolt from the blue, this is something that goes on for a lifetime. As we dismantle our own views, as we listen to the world, and think about the world and meditate on the things of the world, our prajna grows. There's a feedback loop where it becomes easier and easier to do these things.

The third thing we do after we dismantle our views and see the things of the world more clearly, more freely, is we ask this question *What can we do? What does this mean? What are we moved to do as a result of this seeing?* Again, as I was saying last night, it's not complete until we step out into the world and do something, until we take what we come to understand into the world and create the circumstances in the world for more freedom for everyone and everything — in a small way, in a large way. Eradicate malaria, do a beautiful piece of art, take care of a child. Whatever it is that creates more freedom in the world. We can't leave that part out. It's not prajna paramita, it's not the perfection of wisdom, until we raise the child, make the art, contribute to the eradication of malaria.

This part of it is the part we choose -- or not choose, but hopefully choose. The part we can choose, the conscious part. The *Heart Sutra* also reminds us that while there is this part we choose, are conscious of, and work with our whole lives, there's also a part that happens in the dark. There's a part that has a mysterious quality to it, and that's expressed as the mantra at the end : *Gate gate paragate parawamgate bodhi svaha.*

The idea of this mantra in the tradition is that these particular sounds — which is why we don't translate it, because the sounds in the tradition have a kind of power — match the light that is inherent in each of our minds. And by matching it make us aware of it. We become aware of that light in our own minds through saying the *gate gate*. That to me is a

completely mysterious process. That is something that really happens in the dark. I don't understand that, but because of the trust I have in the conscious part of the process being offered, the taking refuge in prajna, I want to try this. I want to do it. I want to take the mantra seriously. I want to see what might be possible.

I wanted to talk just a little bit about that because there are some things in the way that the mantra is introduced that I always found puzzling. I'm extremely happy to have a way of understanding now so I want to pass it on in case you were puzzled by the same things I was.

If we're entering the dark, if we're entering the mysterious and we're leaving the realm of ordinary mind, why do we have all this unsurpassed supreme stuff about the mantras? Does that puzzle anybody else? Why are we ranking? Why are we comparing? It just seems like such a crash after the rest of the sutra. I've been working with the Sanskrit and the Chinese and with a very good contemporary commentator on this, Bill Porter, who is published under the name of Red Pine and has written a book about the *Heart Sutra* that is quite fine. I wanted to deconstruct this a little bit.

The part that we translate as the great vivid mantra : "Therefore no other *prajna paramita* is the great sacred mantra, the great vivid mantra," that word vivid is bright and you sometimes see it translated as bright. The sense of bright was having magic power. The magic power that it has is the ability to create a new state of consciousness. The sense is that the sounds of the mantra invoke the inherent light of our minds. We become aware of that light and that creates a new state of consciousness. That's the bright mantra. That's what that means.

The next part we have translated in the past as the unsurpassed mantra. The sense of that is not the one of which nothing is better, it's not that kind of thing. It means beyond categories. It's the mantra beyond categories. It itself is the beyond of *gate gate paragate parawamgate*. It's not pointing to the beyond, it's not describing the beyond. It itself is the other shore. It's the beyond.

The unsurpassed mantra, the supreme mantra. Again, the word we translate as supreme actually means 'equal to the unequalled'. The Unequaled is the title of the Buddha. Equal to the unequalled means it's buddhahood. It itself is the Buddha. If it's the beyond, if it's the other shore, that's the emptiness part. If it's the Buddha that's the form part. That's the form that it takes in the world. Buddhas are in the world. They have form.

Does that make a crazy sort of sense? It's interesting, yeah? It livens something up, it softens something. It brightens it.

If this mantra is beyond categories it is most definitely not beyond *samsara*, it is not beyond this world. That is really clear. As we have been speaking about this whole retreat, the transformation of suffering that is promised by prajna paramita is not that nothing painful will ever happen again. It's not that you will never feel pain. It's that you will find a kind of freedom and a kind of ease in the world exactly as it is that will transform your relationship to suffering. It's right here and right now. That other shore is right here right now in the freedom and the ease of being truly alive in this world.

The transformation of suffering that comes with prajna is about seeing the world more truthfully when we dismantle our own views and we let things speak for themselves. It's about seeing the world more truthfully and about understanding it more openheartedly, less defendedly, with less story. To see the world more truthfully and to understand it more openheartedly carries with it — I think, I believe, I experience — freedom and ease of the kind we're speaking about.

In the tradition out of which this mantram comes, the mantras were usually directed at a deity, at the gods. You were asking for something or expressing gratitude for something or asking that something not happen or just generally trying to keep the world on an even keel. The prajna paramita mantra is addressed at reality itself.

It's when we make the sounds that invoke the light inherent in our own minds, that light is the same light inherent in the world. There is no inside and outside with that light, there is no difference. It's one light all the way through from one end of the universe to the other. When we say the prajna paramita mantra we are directing it to reality. We are invoking the light of the entire world. Which is also, we can never forget, the light inside our own minds.

We have this final marriage of form and emptiness, at least that you're going to hear from me. The process of taking refuge in prajna paramita, the process of dismantling our own views and seeing the world more truthfully and with an open heart, the part of this we choose and do consciously — that's form. The part that's mysterious, the part that's held in the mantra, the part where we don't have to do this ourselves, even when we take on this practice — we don't take it on with the illusion that we're going to engineer this, we're going to engineer greater freedom and peace. It's not going to happen like that. It's going to happen through some kind

of collaboration through our work, and our love for this, and the inherent light of our minds and the world, which is the same light. Those things will collaborate. That's the emptiness. That's how those things come together. Each of those requires the other. One completes the other. Together it's the whole thing.

In my experience taking refuge in prajna, which the *Heart Sutra* talks about, is a sort of guide book for working with this particular bit of the universe, with these particular complications, beauties, and difficulties. It's a pretty good guide book. It allows us not to just work with what it is to be alive in this world, but maybe even come to appreciate it and in the end come to really love it, to feel a sense of gratitude that we fell through this part of the universe.

Q6: I don't put together the mind with the light. If you're not experiencing inherent light would it make sense to ask the mind to stop doing what it's doing and bring in the light?

JIS : The tradition is that that's what this mantra does. You don't even have to do that; this will do it for you if you take up this mantra. It gets underneath that engineering model : *I can figure this out and work this through*. It lets in something completely mysterious and baffling at work. It lets in the inconceivable and allows that to work.

Q7 : Is that what the wisdom part is?

JIS : Yeah.

Q7 : It's geared toward the mind to bring in the light without thinking about it.

JIS : Yeah, the wisdom comes when we're aware of the light and simultaneously the wisdom lets us become aware of the light. There's not like this big sequential thing. The wisdom is our mind knowing that it is filled with light. It's a nice promise.

[inaudible]

The whole thing is not turning away from any part of it at all. Light is a tricky word because we use it so often as half of a polarity. The sense in which I mean light is the light that contains the light and the dark. It's that inherent shining that is both light and dark.

Q8 : In Richie's new version, the *gate gate* is in a minor key and it feels so different. What you're saying reminds me because you can feel something happen with both, the old tune and the new tune, that brings all of these feelings together. It's sort of like light in a minor key.

JIS : Light in a minor key, that's beautiful. [Laughter] That's really beautiful.

[inaudible]

Q10 : This afternoon we read the excerpts from the record. His words seemed to me like an effort to express to those who were listening the light, the shining that he is seeing in each one. He wasn't saying *You are shining because you already are a fully realized being*. He was saying *I see you shining right now*.

JIS : Yeah. The light inherent in our minds.

Q11 : The Maori have a beautiful saying that they repeat in different variations. "Let darkness be a lightness in the darkness."

Q12 : Those are aboriginal ideas.

JIS : Although anybody who can navigate the seas in little tiny boats by the stars is having something going on up here. [Laughter]

Q13 : But that's because it's quiet.

JIS : Yeah. Yeah.

Q14 : Can you talk a little bit about what happens in that gap between two and three? Not to complain about the world and then to choose how to act in the world. There's this yawning chasm there. I know that how we choose it, the quality of thinking or feeling that goes into what we choose to do is key, but it doesn't just come out. What else can it come out as?

JIS : I talked about one answer to that question, which is an old Chinese commentary on the *Heart Sutra* that says it comes out of listening, thinking, and meditating. Listening to something, letting it speak for itself without telling its story for it, thinking about it, which means considering it, taking it into consideration, empathizing with it, trying to understand the circumstances that relate to it, and meditating on it which is taking it into the darkness and allowing the inconceivable to come in, allowing what we don't yet know to become apparent. That's a version of advice that I think is actually pretty good. And out of all of that, out of the combination of all of that we find a direction.

That's such an appreciation of things as opposed to a complaint. It's such a different thing. It's also a willingness to be hurt by it. If you listen to it and think about it and meditate on it, if it's a painful thing, chances are you're going to get hurt. It's also a willingness to be hurt, a willingness to feel and share the difficulty. Whereas a complaint is a removal from it, an unwillingness to feel the pain.

Q15 : So when you spoke of those three things in relation to how we know the world, actually what you're saying is how we come to know the world is how we figure out what to do with it.

JIS : Yeah. I really think they're the same movement.

Q15 : And sometimes the world just calls, right? Not always, but I'm thinking of a woman I don't know very well. She lost her son about a year and a half ago. He was a young man who committed suicide. She and her husband have a little house in a seaside town in Mexico that they've been going to for quite some time. While down there she started to feel like giving some art classes to the kids down there. She started to do that just when she was down there. The beach had a terrible litter problem because tons and tons of people come to the beach. It's a family beach. She had this idea *What if my kids and I started to paint the garbage cans, do our art on garbage cans?* And sure enough, almost immediately, the next day the mayor of the town called and said, "I hear you need some garbage cans." [Laughter] So now all of a sudden this was a happening thing and spreading. And she just did it. I didn't see her going through that process, but I did hear of her having gone through that kind of process. Her heart needed to be reset.

Q16 : Can't that process be in a simultaneous moment?

JIS : I think so, yeah.

Q16 : It's not like you do this and then you do that and then you do that and here it is. I'm not saying she didn't do that. We don't know. There had to have been something that called her.

Q15 : What is it called when it calls you, exactly? It can be all those things. It's the voice of all those things.

JIS : That, again, speaks to prajna not being a bolt that comes from the blue and zaps us and makes us different. It's something we do and get better at. As we get better at it maybe things happen more immediately and more intuitively.

Q17 : Just being able to hear the call when it's calling.

JIS : Yeah. Yeah.

Q17 : Often we don't hear the call when it's calling because we're distracted or because our skills are not honed.

Q18 : We hear it and we say we shouldn't listen to that because there's something else to do. So to hear it and act on it ...

Q17 : Well, sometimes it's just being totally devastated by something in your life that cuts the bullshit back a bit. [Laughter]

JIS : Yeah.

Q19 : I was thinking about what you said about the inconceivable. Like maybe I didn't even know that that existed.

JIS : The inconceivable was inconceivable.

Q19 : I didn't ever imagine a Wal-Mart down the street, it was inconceivable. [Laughter] Along those terms that just pop up like that. That's kind of intriguing to know what's next.

JIS : Okay, great. So what's your inconceivable response to the inconceivable Wal-Mart?

Q19 : Do you really want to know?

Q20 : Dynamite. [Laughter]

Q19 : I'll do what I can to be active in what's going on in with saying people don't want it, to support my neighbors because it's just not me. In a sense I don't think it's that stingy because it's more than myself who's going to be affected by this. That to me is more like a community kind of consciousness.

JIS : Yeah.

Q19 : But ... what was the question again?

JIS : What is your inconceivable response to the inconceivable Wal-Mart?

Q19 : To just let it be built.

Q21 : Is it already there?

Q19 : No. It's being debated. The inconceivable thought is to just let it be. But then I have this community consciousness fighting back so I'm not sure which one I want to put ... Well, one I would put time into and the other one I would just let happen. Which is basically inconceivable. I don't plan on it.

JIS : There might be a C. You've got an A and B.

Q19 : Uh huh.

JIS : There might be a C that you haven't thought of yet.

Q19 : I'll wait for that one.

JIS : So hold the question open and notice what attaches to it.

Q19 : Right, right. That's what I like is that there's something else.

Q21 : Is there a relationship or not between what's conceivable and what's not conceivable and logic?

JIS : Um, I think logic is in the realm of the conceivable, isn't it?

Q20 : It's in the realm of the conceivable, right. Inconceivable is something that doesn't progress logically in the way that we're thinking about something.

JIS : Yeah.

Q21 : But doesn't the inconceivable have a deep logic? But it's not the logic we're comfortable with?

JIS : Yeah. Yes. Absolutely.

Q22 : The inconceivable has a deep logic, but it's not the logic of our minds trying to figure something out.

Q23 : It doesn't have a deep, heart logic. Like it's not a branch of a tree. It's just a trick. It's a fraud. It's something just showing off trying to be powerful, even powerful to do good. What I think is important to hear about deep logic is like humility. It just belongs.

Q22 : I didn't say that the other logic is bad. Two plus two does equal four. Two jellybeans and two jellybeans is four.

JIS : I think that prajna is a kind of awareness of both, of both those kinds of logic, of not taking either one or the other as the only thing but what happens when they're together in the room.

Q23 : I'm feeling that logic, I've never thought this before, is very related to authenticity. There's a connection. I don't know if I could run my brain around it. It's just a sense, a feeling that logic is very connected. If something is logical there's an authenticity about it. It's authentic. I've never thought of logic being a profound word in Zen, but it is.

Q24 : I think that the root of logic is *logos* which means the word.

Q23 : The word, yeah.

JIS : Is there anything else?

Q24 : Yeah. What's deep?

JIS : What's deep?

Q24 : Yeah, if there's logic and then there's deep logic, what's deep? Where is it?

[Laughter] Where can I find it?

Q25 : When you ask me that ... It's no place. It's its own place. It comes from everywhere.

Q26 : So it's not limited to this.

Q27 : Do you think deep logic is related to chaos? I think it is.

JIS : Do you know the expression *El rio abajo el rio?* The river under the river.

Q27 : No. But now I just heard it. [Laughter]

JIS : Somehow that comes to mind with deep logic.

Q28 : Really when we're talking about deep logic we're talking about a logic that exists but is not immediately apparent on the surface. It's not that mysterious. That's what we're talking about. Asking about chaos is sort of like asking *Is deep logic to say that there's an order that we may not see?* Is that sort of what you were saying? Or is deep logic something that's not ordered? Because really we may just be talking about the way it is. It's just the way things are.

Q29 : Logic is supposed to be chaotic. [Laughter]

Q28 : Yeah.

JIS : Yeah, yeah.

Q28 : So you're saying that also is part of the way things are.

Q29 : Exactly. It is part of the way things are, so it has to be very related. There is this chaos theory, which evidently has tremendous validity.

Q28 : I tried to read about it, but it didn't make sense to me. [Laughter]

Q30 : In this very moment as we're all sitting here, in this room in this very moment if we're quiet we can feel the chaos and clarity all at once. It's all at once all those things and that's just listening to it. It's not like they're opposed. Getting back to last night where there's this or that but it's almost as if they cannot exist without another. It's like two ogres leaning over a door, they cannot be without ...

JIS : Why don't we sing it [the *Heart Sutra*] as light in a minor key.

[Singing]

Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.

Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.

Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.

Thank you all very much.