

Heart Sutra, II  
Joan Sutherland, Roshi  
Mountain Cloud Zen Center ~ Santa Fe, NM  
July 21, 2005

We're keeping company during this retreat with the *Heart Sutra*. We meet tonight a few hours before the *Heart Sutra* full moon rises. The reason we're doing that is because the man who wrote all of the music for the liturgy we use died two and a half weeks ago. Just a few days before he died he unveiled the last big piece of the Liturgy, which was his version of the *Heart Sutra*. It is deeply beautiful, as he was. He loved that sutra, it meant a lot to him. As Richie walks across the empty sky we keep company with him walking the earth by taking up the *Heart Sutra* this week.

Last night I mentioned some questions I had about the *Heart Sutra* and maybe it bears repeating since we have a number of visitors tonight.

The first question I have about it is there's this vast perfection of literature out of which the *Heart Sutra* comes and all of it is given to us by Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom — which makes a certain kind of sense — except this one. This one, alone of all of them is given to us by Avalokiteshvara, by the embodiment of compassion. Why is it that this sutra is spoken by compassion?

The second question is about *prajna*, usually translated as wisdom. The *Prajnaparamita* was written at a time when things were changing a great deal in the dharma. Something new was coming in. One way of looking at the movement was that it was a way from a longing for nirvana, a longing to deal with the difficulties, the suffering, and the pain of life by finding a kind of separate peace — walking out of the room, to use a simple metaphor.

What shifted was people began to think *Maybe there's another way. It's not about walking out of the room. It's not about finding a separate peace. What if the longing for nirvana became instead a deep desire for wisdom, a particular kind of wisdom that comes in and through the world, is made of the world, is made of our relationships in the world?* In other words, what if instead of walking out of the room we walked deeper into the room? What would that be like? What difference does that make?

The third question I had was about the part in the middle with all the no's. *No eye, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind. No color, sound, smell, taste, touch, and so on.* Which is, gosh, it's a lot of no's. And yet, it has a quality like a prayer or an incantation. It can actually feel exhilarating, even

thrilling to go through all those no's. Why should that be? Why should this list of negations be thrilling in some ways to us?

The fourth question is about the promise of the *Heart Sutra* which is "If we have no hinderance in the mind, we'll have no fear and if we have no fear then nirvana is right here." We don't have to go anywhere, we're already in the room of nirvana. That seems to me to be huge. *If we have no hinderance, there'll be no fear and without fear we'll be in paradise.* Is that the promise of this sutra?

The last question that I mentioned was a question Richie and I shared which was : What about a tradition whose founding story requires that the hero abandon his wife and child to go off on a spiritual quest? Does that mean anything? Does that mean something? Richie worried that question over and over in so many great ways.

I think there were two parts for him. One was what gets left out when we do that? We are in a tradition after all where in most times and places the feminine was not particularly honored or honored in strange ways. The life of the family was seen as an impediment. So, what if we invite Yasodhara, who was the Buddha's wife and Rahula, their son, back into the room? What becomes possible when we do that? What was excluded that comes in, and what happens new and fresh because they're present?

I'm going to wander around in and among all of those questions tonight, but I want to begin with Richie's question and also begin with Richie's voice.

John Tarrant, who's my collaborator on the book — Richie did the music — wrote a dedication that we use in our service. Richie took off on it and just improvised this wonderful thing. Those of you who are familiar with the Liturgy will get this part of the service and the part where Richie just takes off on it. I'd like to start there.

[music playing] *Buddha nature invades the whole universe. It exists right here, right now. ... All the little girls long since gone ... Keep on smiling.* [end of recording]

That was Richie's song to all the grandmothers and mothers long since gone. That was something he knew really intimately. When he was a child he was ill for a long time and he was in bed next to his mother who was also ill. He got up out of that bed, but she didn't. She died. He lost his mother as a child. His grandmother and his mother's sister, Ruth, scooped him up and raised him, his brothers, and his sister. So he knows a lot, he knew a lot, about

when we open the door to the mothers and the grandmothers and what it's like when they're not in the room.

What's so interesting to me about the *Heart Sutra*, which can on the surface appear kind of cool, kind of emptiness, kind of pretty much just wiping everything away into emptiness, is also in one way deeply about the presence and the absence of the feminine.

In honor of the grandmothers and the mothers long since gone I want to try to give you a little bit of a taste of how people would have understood this sutra when it was first written, when people first spoke it, when people first chanted it together. It's very different than our understanding of it now.

I mentioned that there was this shift with the coming of the *Prajnaparamita* which was vast, hundreds of sutras in 600 volumes. There were three sutras which were considered to contain all of the wisdom of all of that. They were called the Three Mother Sutras. There was quite a long one, over hundred thousand verses which was called the *Vast Mother Sutra*. There was a pretty short one which was only about 8,000 verses that was called the *Brief Mother Sutra* [Laughter] and there was the one in the middle known as the *Intermediate Mother Sutra*. I've been having a lot of enjoyment carrying around in my imagination the Vast Mother, the Brief Mother, and the Intermediate Mother.

Of these three mother sutras, the *Heart Sutra* was said to be the heart of these three mothers, that their beating heart is here in this sutra, the vast, the intermediate, and the brief. There's some sense in which it's the grandmothers speaking to us. That's how people felt it, that's how people understood it some way. What they had to say was about Prajnaparamita, the perfection of wisdom, who was seen as feminine, who was seen as a goddess. There are statues of her. She was often brought into visualization in the Tibetan tradition. So highest perfect wisdom turns out to be this woman, who knew? This mother. She was called the mother of all the buddhas because it was in her womb, in the womb of highest perfect wisdom that awakening is born, that enlightenment comes to fruition.

There are stories, again, about presences and absences here. There's a Tibetan visualization in which you visualize Prajnaparamita on a throne and you envision Avalokiteshvara next to her. As Avalokiteshvara begins to say the *Heart Sutra*, all the beings of the world are brought to the breast of Prajnaparamita. When we speak the *Heart Sutra*, when

we live in the wisdom that it talks about it allows us to bring everything to our hearts. We don't deny anything, we don't reject anything. We can embrace everything.

There's another story that talks about how if you turn away from this, if you turn away from this challenging, difficult, lifelong, all-consuming desire for and embodiment of prajna, it's like a blind child separated from its mother, which is a terrible image of bereft, isn't it? I mean, a blind child separated from her mother. Even if she were to stumble into her, she might not recognize her. There's a sense of what's at stake here. There's a sense of the tremendous beauty of living in prajna and the sense of the bereft, alienated, and sad feeling of living without it.

Another one of the stories says that soon after Shakyamuni arose from under the bodhi tree [he] went up to heaven — his mother had died when he was seven years old and was taken up into the heavens and was watching him from in the heavens — and preached this sutra to her.

Now, my guess is there wasn't a whole lot of preaching going on. It was probably more of a conversation. There's this first sense that what Shakyamuni does when he gets up is goes and finds his lost mother and they have a conversation. Out of that conversation comes the *Heart Sutra*.

They talked about this for days and days and days up on the top of Mount Sumeru, on this high mountain. Every night Shakyamuni would come down and give a summary of what they talked about to Shariputra. Shariputra was the wisest of his disciples and so he would give him the highlights of the conversation of that day. In Shariputra we have another echo of this theme because Shariputra means the son of the egret. The understanding is that the egret was his mother. We have another mother/son pair.

Shariputra sort of got it and sort of didn't get it. What the *Heart Sutra* is, is Avalokiteshvara coming along to correct some of Shariputra's understanding of what it is the Buddha told him about the Buddha's conversations with his mother. And that's how we get the *Heart Sutra* according to this story.

Does all of that matter? Does it make a difference? To me, it does because it challenges our idea of what prajna is. When you look at the old commentaries that are from the time of these stories we're talking about, it's clear that prajna is a combination of intellect, of cognition, of thinking, and also of knowledge, of intuition, of the wisdom of the body, of what

we would call today emotional intelligence. Those parts of it are talked about and all of those parts are necessary for prajna. Prajna is a wisdom of the whole self, of not just the mind, but the heart, the body, and the spirit as well.

In the same way that we can't hope for enlightenment to come down and hit us like a bolt of lightning and save us from the messy job of having to live our lives, neither can we expect prajna to come like a bolt of lightning and save us from the messy job of cultivating our knowledge, our intelligence, our hearts, our feelings, and the life of our bodies. Prajna isn't just a state, a thing over there on the other shore. It's always changing every time we change what we know with our bodies, our hearts, and our minds. Our prajna changes. It moves and grows and shrivels and does all of that as we do too.

That seems to matter, to me. That seems to make a difference.

Then there is this question of *paramita* which means gone to the other shore. It means perfect and complete, but the sense of it is 'to the other shore.' Here there's the idea that life can be hard. It can be like swimming in a sea; sometimes it's calm, beautiful, and warm, and sometimes it's choppy, scary, and there are ripples of things that go through the sea that catch us.

As a child, I remember one of my own meditations was to sit on the beach on a bay that was off the ocean. Mostly there were just these little tiny wavelets that would come lap at my feet on the beach, but every once in a while a great sailing ship would go by in the distance and it would send out these waves through the bay. First, I would notice that all of the boats that were moored out in front of our house would begin to rock and then the waves would come up to the shore and for a few moments there would be actual waves on the shore. Then it would calm down again and go back to the little wavelets.

There's the sense of those kinds of movements through the ocean, great ships passing in the distance. Some of them quite beautiful : images from the Hubble Spacecraft, Nelson Mandela being freed from jail. How beautiful the ripples on the water at times like that and times when the waves are hard : wars, bombings, things like that.

We're swimming and prajna paramita is the ship that picks us up out of that water and gives us a ferry. If we think that boat is going to take us to a shore that is somewhere else, we're like what Hakuin calls "Digging a hole in the earth, searching for blue sky."

The great revelation of prajna paramita is that the boat is the other shore. We don't leave the ocean. We have something that supports us, something that sustains us, but that's the other shore. That's what Elaine Scarry called 'the merciful beach,' right there on the boat with everybody and everything else.

I want to also talk a little bit about those no's — *No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind, etc.* — and about kinds of no's.

When I first started working with Richie some people had a hard time with him. One of the first things we did together during a retreat was called Mama Buddha Dharma. Richie was the Mama Buddha. He literally came through a window in the meditation hall in drag and did this whole riff about what gets left out if you close the window to Mama Buddha.

[Laughter] It was beautiful. And it was wild. He's Cajun, if that helps anybody who doesn't know him.

Some people really didn't like it. Some people thought that was not the Dharma and they left. They left the community over it.

That's one kind of 'no.' That's the no of *I don't like this and therefore this is bad*. That's the no that stops the story. End of story right there. Gone. Over.

In the weeks since his death I've talked to a number of people who also had a hard time when he first came but they didn't leave. They stayed with it. They got interested in their aversive reaction. They got interested in why they didn't like it and they stayed and listened. So many of them have told me *What I came to realize was I didn't want that much life in the dojo. I came to meditation to get away from that. I came to meditation to escape the messiness of the transvestite Cajun climbing in through the window.* [Laughter] *I didn't want it coming in. I didn't want it coming in.* Then they said *I came to see that that's exactly the Dharma. That's exactly it and how incredibly beautiful and rich it made things to say yes to that.*

That's the provisional 'no.' That's the no that says *I don't like this but I'm willing to hang around and see if something's going to change* — that lets the story continue. Maybe the ultimate outcome is the same. Maybe you decide it's not for you and that's alright as long as you don't say *It's not for me and so it's bad*. Maybe you'll say *Oh, it's for me after all. The room just got a little bigger, a little brighter.*

The no's in the *Heart Sutra* offer us a way to work with that kind of stuff. It's not sweeping everything back into emptiness. It's not saying nothing is real, nothing matters, nothing

counts. It's saying *all* of your ideas, opinions, criticisms, judgements, big theories, founding stories, and major life principles, all of them are empty too. They are as empty as everything else.

"The self is just a name," the Buddha said. *The self is just a name.* It's just something we call something we experience. Same with eye, ear, nose, tongue. Same with all of those things. Boy, same with objects of thought, right? The names we give the objects of our thought. And what a good phrase that is because of how it highlights how much we make those things up in our mind.

That's a no that's liberating. That's a no that clears away the hinderances, clears away the opinions, ideas, judgments, strong feelings, certainties, and principles that actually keep us out of life, keep us away from things because they interpose themselves between us and things as they are. They try to substitute themselves for things as they are. *Live with your images. Live with your ideas. Live with your opinions, not with complicated, messy, gorgeous, beautiful, wild things as they actually are.*

That's why I think those no's can be so thrilling because we can as we're saying them experience what it's like to let all that fall away, to let all that go. To discover that the more we do, the more we stand on the bare ground of prajna the simpler things are, the more interesting things are, the more beautiful even when they're difficult, things are.

That long night under the Bodhi tree, at one point Shakyamuni said, "Oh carpenter I have met the maker of this house." He was talking about the house of pain that's made by all of our hinderances, all of those things that we substitute for life. "I have met the maker of this house and I will never rebuild this house again. The rafters are down, the beam is smashed, and I will never make it again." That's the no of the *Heart Sutra*. To be able to bring that house of pain down and to stand on the bare ground not so afraid, not so defended. To be able to bring things to our breast and not fear that.

That's the promise of the *Heart Sutra* and that's what becomes possible when we open the room to Yasodhara and Rahula, when we open the room to all of the parts of ourselves, when we open the room to the things of this world. It's messier. Sometimes it's harder but having a taste of prajna it's hard to turn away from that, it's hard to turn back. It's hard to not want that to continue to unfold because somehow it becomes so clear how that is the voice of

compassion. That is how compassion acts in the world. If we can do that hard work of letting go of the junk that gets between us and life, life is right there waiting for us.

The last thing I want to say has to do with something else that becomes possible if we bring in the grandmothers and the mothers.

There's a lot of imagery about Prajnaparamita that has to do with pregnancy, about Prajnaparamita being pregnant with us or pregnant with awakening and giving birth to that. What I'd like to do is recommend to you the image of pregnancy for the spiritual path. In Zen we have heroic images of the spiritual path. *We're going to penetrate, we're going to scale the Silver Mountain, we're going to swallow the iron ball of doubt.* It's like *Go, go, go! Do, do, do!* There's something wonderful about that so I want to give you something else to put alongside that.

To be meditating, to be on a spiritual path is in some ways to be pregnant. In one way that seems so bloody obvious I can't believe I have to say it, but since it doesn't get said in the tradition I'm going to say it. Sure, it's about penetrating, but is it not also about being penetrated? Is it not also about having something come in to us, take root inside of us and grow? Is it not as much about that? Is not the freeing ourselves from hinderances as much about making ourselves open to the possibility of being entered like that as it is about anything else?

Pregnancy has a couple of other things to recommend it as an image for the spiritual life. One is that, you know how you say *Oh, I don't know. I'm not really doing my practice, I'm not sitting or I'm off the path somehow, I'm on a detour. I want to get back to real practice.* Well, imagine saying *You know, I'm not pregnant today.* [Laughter] *I was pregnant yesterday, but I'm going to take a break from being pregnant.* Or *I just don't have time to be pregnant today.* [Laughter] *You know?* No. No. You're pregnant all the time. That's what's going on. Everything that happens is part of the pregnancy. You're never on the path or off the path of pregnancy, you're always on the path of pregnancy. In the same way we're never on the path or off the path of our practice, we're always on the path of our practice, it's just that sometimes we forget or sometimes we like to pretend we're not.

There's no detours. Nothing that happens is a distraction, a break, or something that has gone wrong; it's all *it*. It's all *it*. What if you embraced all of it as *it* in the same way that you embrace everything that happens with a pregnancy as being part of that?



That's one way it might be helpful. The other way is that it's so fundamental again to say the blazingly obvious, it's so fundamentally about a relationship. It's about the most intimate relationship of beings, one to another. That's what meditation is about. Fundamentally, it's about relationship; our relationship with ourselves, our relationship with the world, and somehow our relationship with the vastness as well.

We don't take a break from that either. We're never not in relationship with ourselves, the world, and the vastness as much as we might like to not be sometimes. We always are.

There is a strong strain in Zen of that sense of companionship, the ways we are companioned and we companion. Not just other beings, but the vastness as well. This was something that Dongshan particularly spoke about. There's a wonderful story where someone says to him, "Work, work, work. All you do is work. Why don't you take a break? Why do you work so hard?" He says, "I do it for another." The questioner asks, "Well, why don't you get the other to do it for herself?" And Dongshan says, "Because she has no hands." So there's that sense of we companion the vastness by being the hands, the eyes, the heart, the wisdom of the vastness. That's what we bring. That's what we can do. We're always in that relationship. We're always walking with the vastness in that way.

There's something beautiful about that. In another time someone asked Dongshan, "What are you doing?" He replied, "I'm making some tea for that other." "Well, why don't you get that other to make the tea for himself?" Dongshan said, "Fortunately I am here to do it."

Fortunately we are here to do it. We are here to be the hands, the eyes, the heart, the brain, the feet of the vastness. If that seems romantic or unattainable, one last Dongshan story. When he was very, very ill in his last illness, someone asked him, "Is there one who is not sick?" He said, "Yes there is. There is one who is not sick." "Well, what are you doing being sick then?" He said, "I am taking care of that one who is not sick."

It's not just about being the good, wonderful, and holy hands, eyes, heart, and mind of the vastness. It's about being sick when the vastness needs to be sick. That's the way we take care. When we're sick, when we're sleeping, when we're cranky, when we just do the goddamn grocery shopping, when we stay up all night with a sick child when all we want to do is sleep, when we pay the bills, when we write the checks for refugee relief — all of that, all of those simple ordinary everyday things are our taking care of that other one who is never sick, who doesn't need checks, who doesn't need groceries.

Those are just a few of my thoughts about warming up our cool understanding of the *Heart Sutra*. I welcome any comments or questions you might have.

Q1 : Exactly what you said has been really bubbling in me lately like crazy, that whole saying no to things. I've been slammed with things this week and I'll just bring it up because it's so close to this *Heart Sutra*. What I'm hearing is that it's an opening of the heart to let all that in.

Okay, the first thing that's happening is they're building a Super Wal-Mart down my street which is huge. It's just changed my life. I'm really letting that in. What does that mean in something so big like that? On a smaller scale, a barking dog was keeping me up for nights and nights on end. I'm trying to let it in but the question for me is when it's so upsetting and you're in moments of distress, how do you open? What's created is anger and things like that. I know that it's really hard. Is that the whole picture, a lot of work ahead? [Laughter] It's like *Okay, now this*.

JIS : Let me question a basic assumption which is *How do I let it in?* It's already in, right? The barking dog is already in your sleep, in your not sleep. The Super Wal-Mart is already down the block. It's in. Change the question. It's not a question of letting it in or not, it's a question of what do you do with it once it's in?

Here's a distinction we've made many times before so forgive me for repeating myself. Let's take the smaller one, the barking dog. You're lying in bed at night and there's a barking dog. It's really upsetting because you need to sleep. If you don't sleep you're going to have a crummy day tomorrow and it's going to get worse and snowball. You're going to get cranky and heavens knows, you might get fired because you're not getting enough sleep. Right? It goes to all of that.

The first thing to notice is we don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing that the dog is keeping you up at night. We really don't. We have an idea, but we don't know. What would it be like to not have an opinion whether it's a good thing or a bad thing but just to notice that it's happening? Sometimes you can just do that. Sometimes it's just like *Oh*.

A woman I work with was having terrible insomnia and waking up every night and being up for hours in the middle of the night. This seemed to her like a really horrible thing until we talked about what it was like being up in the middle of the night. What can you do? What's

possible then that isn't possible at another time? What if you don't assume it's a problem? That's one way of working with it. Sometimes that works. Sometimes it doesn't. If it doesn't then you might feel frustrated, angry, dying for a good night's sleep. If you don't mind feeling all of that, you're not suffering. It's when you mind feeling that way that you start to suffer.

Do you see the distinction I'm making? *I'm just frustrated. I'm just sleepy.* Okay.

Q1 : That's just what happens.

JIS : That's what's happening. It's in. That's what's happening. If you say *I can't bear that I'm not sleeping. I have to sleep or else. I hate this*, then you're suffering. Before that you're just not sleeping, and we don't know what that is. Do you know what I'm saying?

Q1 : I do. It's a big difference.

JIS : Okay.

On the other hand, I'm not saying don't do anything about anything. On the Wal-Mart issue, you know ... [Laughter] Something's in and we find that our deepest truest reaction to it is *There's something wrong here and I want to do something about it*. Cool. That's a genuine relationship with it. If you say *There's something wrong here and I want to do something about it and if I don't prevail I'm going to be unhappy*, that's suffering. Does that make sense?

Q1 : Uh huh.

JIS : If it's just *There's something wrong here and I'm going to do something about it* and that's it, that's just being in life.

Q1 : Thank you.

JIS : Thanks for the question.

Q2 : I met Ross Fowler, the Australian roshi and piano player a couple years ago. He was saying he had this job a long time ago at a piano bar where he had to go in and play every night. He said that he realized at one point there was absolutely no relationship between how tired he thought he was and how well he played. I've always been really worried that if I don't get enough sleep it's going to be awful. I teach, and I started noticing that I could walk into the classroom thinking *It's going to be really awful because I'm completely tired* and it has no relation at all to whether the class is good. I like that.

JIS : Yeah. Everything gets tired. Your ego gets tired. [Laughter] Your stories get tired. Truly. Sometimes when your ego gets tired, your stories get tired, and your judgement gets

tired, something else can happen that's really interesting. Your habits get tired, your usual ways of doing things. [Laughter]

Q3 : That can be good.

JIS : Yeah, that can be good. Is it a good thing? Is it a bad thing? Mm, I don't know.

Q4 : I want to go back to that notion that this idea in the *Heart Sutra* [inaudible]. If we are all pregnant there's no way of getting out of being pregnant, I get that, but there are certain efforts that are appropriate to make like not smoking, not abusing alcohol, all these things that make for a good pregnancy. Where I get confused is with the sense that you have to do something about your practice. *I'm off the path. I've lost the way. Don't worry about it because you're pregnant whether you want to be or not.* And yet, there are certain efforts that are appropriate to make. I'm trying to figure out, I'm trying to feel what makes them appropriate as opposed to inappropriate struggle or strife.

JIS : Ok. That's a great question and there's a simple answer. If our efforts are aimed solely at getting us back on what we think the path is, that's just lost effort. If our efforts are aimed at being where we are as deeply, fully, and committedly as we can, that's great effort. Do you see? If you're always trying to say *This isn't it* and yank yourself over to the idea of what *it* is, it's just a waste of energy.

Q4 : But what if where you are is not a good place? What if where you are is wildly alcoholic? So you wouldn't want to go deeper into that world.

JIS : I don't know. That's really hard to speak about abstractly. There are some people for whom going deeper into that room may be exactly what they need to do. I'm not recommending it, but I'm saying you can't have abstract principles like that. Every life is its own life and what is true for one person isn't true for another.

The question is : Are you just out of control or is there some engagement with what's going on? If you're just out of control I hope you have good friends who can support you with the control you don't have at that moment. If there is some kind of engagement, even if it looks really dark, who knows?

Q4 : So from there you could say that there really are no guiding principles, no guiding values.

JIS : No, there are only *your* guiding principles and *your* guiding values. What do you know from the life you've lived? What's your prajna? What is the sum total of your

knowledge, your thinking, your emotional intelligence, your instinct, your intuition? What does it tell you? That's very strong. That's not nothing. And if it tells you *I should do this and not this* you do that knowing it may be a mistake and that's okay. It's the best mistake you can make in these circumstances.

If it's always about getting it right or getting it wrong, you're always going to be in a struggle about right and wrong. That's what it's going to be about. If it's about taking your prajna, if it's about pulling something into your heart, into Prajnaparamita's heart, to see what to do about it, that's really different. Knowing that that's a step on the way and not the destination. You might do that and feel that wasn't it, so you do something else.

Q4 : I guess what's hard is knowing what's guiding you. Is that coming from the heart or coming from a disconnection?

JIS : Don't you know that? Can't you feel the difference? Is it partial or is it all of you? Predilections are partial. When you're making a decision out of a little part of yourself, that's a predilection or a habit or a something. If you're making a decision out of all of those things together that's prajna.

Q4 : I'm not so worried about myself as I am about other people. [Laughter]

Q5 : Good luck with that one. [Laughter]

JIS : So then my dear, your job is to create the circumstances in which everyone can find their freedom. What does that mean to you? Does that mean art? Does that mean clean water? Does that mean fighting against war? What does that mean? Work on creating the circumstances for everyone to find their own freedom and trust that they will. If we all did that I think things might be okay. [Laughter]

Maybe that's a good place to leave it.

Thank you all very much.