

THE HEART SUTRA
PRAJNA PARAMITA HRYDAYA
SUTRA

*A Short Study of a Consistent Pathway to
Enlightenment
"The Womb of the Buddas"*



Goldenage 30 December 2006

Thought is Light

THE HEART SUTRA, READILY UNDERSTOOD.

The Heart sutra represents a lesson in the basic comprehension of being and the world delivered to one of the Buddha's wisest disciples [Shariputra (Sanskrit) or Sharadwatibu (Tibetan)]. The lesson in insight is presented by The Buddha of Compassion [called Avalokitesvara (Sanskrit) or Chenrezig (Tibetan)] a transcendent being. This entity or state of pure consciousness has the designation of "Bodhisattva" which means that he is in the final stages of attaining Buddhahood. A Bodhisattva is one who has vowed to help all sentient beings attain Nirvana, that is, Supreme or Ultimate Enlightenment, before he himself achieves it.

The "teaching" contained in the Heart Sutra is the very essence of Avalokitesvara's own attainment. The core insight concerns the nature and origin of "compassion". By this, one should understand that it is the comprehension as to the origin of this deep-rooted feeling that is being offered by Avalokitesvara. In sum, this realisation explains how the notion of compassion (in all of its forms) enters into the realm of sentient being, as a collective category of consciousness exposed to the world. This is the world characterised by the apprehension of forms and the allocation of names thereto.

Thus the 1st & 2nd lines of the Sutra:

1 *The Noble Avalokitesvara/Chenrezig,
Bodhisattva,*

2 *While Coursing in the Deep PrajnaParamita,*

The 1st line has already been discussed. The 2nd line refers to the origin of the insight proposed by Avalokitesvara. It arises from a form of deep meditation or samaadhi and the type of insight concerned is given in the last word of the line namely Prajnaparamita. Prajnaparamita is “the deep consciousness of transcendence & wisdom”. This is a viewpoint obtained from outside the “normal” world of duality, of name and form which is inhabited by the ego-self. It is the “view” from “beyond the peak” (para {beyond}- mita {peak}) wherein the duality of name & form has yet to arise. This is a state of consciousness where the ordinary world cannot be immediately perceived by the senses. For all intents and purposes therefore, the world does not exist.

This is all well and good one might say, but how can this state of awareness be achieved by the ordinary person? This is a fair question and the sutra proceeds to answer this query. In the next line some clues are provided as to the way in which the main insight into the nature of compassion arises.

Avalokitesvara:

3 Looked upon the Five Skandhas and, seeing they were empty of self-existence [shunya], said:

We see that Avalokitesvara looked at something (a conceptual entity) called the 5 Skandhas. In modern English we might say that he looked at body and soul meaning he examined the “real physical world” (the body etc.) as well as the conscious being inhabiting the body. When he did so he discovered that both categories were “empty of self-existence”. The 5 skandhas encompassed physical form (the 1st skandha) & 4 other categories that can collectively be summarised as “personal consciousness” consisting of aspects of thinking, perception, memory and so forth together with “consciousness” itself. Taken together the 5 skandhas represent an all-inclusive categorisation of human consciousness and its operational ports (sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing, and mind) together with all of external physical reality. In its finer details the classification is complete in that there is no “thing” or idea that cannot be contained therein. None-the-less, Avalokitesvara found this systematic structure to be quite empty of self-existence. Now the meaning of this statement is based on the whole concept of meditative contemplation used by the Buddha himself. Thus by understanding this we may see how the Buddha reached nirvana. We can also gain some insight into that conscious state without entering directly into it. In brief the procedure involved consists of systematic negation. One might say that through the negative assessment of the world and

being the Buddha “backs out of the world” & into a state of unlimited positivism. How was that achieved? The single most important step is described next but first Avalokitesvara calls Shariputra to attention (wake up!):

4 Here! (*Right Now!*) *Shariputra*

Then he delivers both the key statement and the meditative focus in one phrase:

5 *Form is not self-existence!*

This is also translated as: *Form is emptiness!*

Fair enough, but what exactly does this mean and why is it of such importance for a meditative approach?

In effect it will come as no surprise for most to learn that there is no “self” in form but there is a bit more to it than that. It really means that within form nothing has existence in and of itself. A thing, such as a wooden table for instance, arises as a discriminative product from the ground-state enjoyed by all other things. This is so for the world, for the universe and for all thoughts about the contents of these categories. The aspect of discrimination that confers the character of “apartness” to our wooden table is the work of the mind.

But why or how is this so? If one examines the world of things closely it soon becomes apparent that no thing can be identified (in time, space or mind) as “in-and-of-itself”, as self-existing. This is because “categories” of things overlap in as much as each can only be defined in terms of the characteristics shared by others. And nor is this so strange, taking again our wooden table we may for instance distinguish it from a tree. A tree has a natural growth-form, a table does not. Another non overlapping character for distinguishing them apart may be that the tree is alive (say) but then, they may both be made of wood (a clear overlap). As products, they both arise as the result of a life-process, they both decay into the constituents of soil, they are both comprised of the constituents of soil and so forth. To repeat then, there is no thing that can be described as existing in and of itself. Everything is thus part of a matrix of continuity, things as it were, can be seen to emerge out of this continuity or one can concentrate on the fact that there are these shared characteristics which tend to draw things back into a kind of perceptual soup.

If one concentrates firmly on the shared aspects of things as a continuum a curious transition will occur. In a sudden moment the mind will find itself observing the veil of continuity and standing apart there-from completely. This is the very first step into the sphere of Prajnaparamita, a small one but a start. There is a deep flux-state controlled by the mind, things either appear to be quite discrete (at

any level of discrimination) or they merge. Now the logic of non-overlap in description demonstrates conclusively that things do not exhibit the characteristic of self-sufficiency. Why then do they appear to differ and to be sufficiently separate that the word “discrete”, as in the phrase “discrete entities”, can be deployed by the waking mind to describe the situation?

Now, the answer can be one of two alternatives: 1) things are separate from each other because they exist in and of themselves (in spite of the obvious logic to the contrary), and are actually outside the mind; 2) it is a property of mind itself that separates one thing from another and this is done by “discrimination” which in effect emplaces a false perceptual barrier around each detected & specified item. Furthermore the nature of this boundary is: 1) that it is infinitesimally thin; 2) that this barrier in fact consists of “emptiness” for it is certainly not space nor is it anything else. It is an artefact of the mind.

But things are multitudinous and densely packed at every level of perception from the microscopic to the macroscopic. In effect, this means that the world we see around us is chock-full of (aggregated) emptiness (form is emptiness) and it is the mind alone that confers content therein through the process of discrimination. Now, if this insight is held firmly in focus and then considered at progressively deeper levels, the world of name and form vanishes and the

subject commences to “course in the realm of PrajnaParamita.”

Avalokitesvara next says:

6 [not self-existence] is Form!

i.e. emptiness is Form!

Now, from the perspective of 1st step prajnaparamita (above), it is very easy to see that emptiness must be form since it is the work of but a moment to focus on the table and indeed any other object and to then see it as otherwise expected. From the paragraph above, it also follows that from the widest perspective down to the multitude of the most minutely discriminated particle or charged state, there must also exist a continuum of emptiness that must exactly co-occur with form at the limit of perception.

Thus, not only is there no self-sufficiency in form i.e. form is emptiness but also that which is non self sufficient is form i.e. emptiness is form. To push the point further Avalokitesvara then says unequivocally:

7 Emptiness is not separate from form

8 Form is not separate from emptiness

9 Whatever is form is emptiness

IO *Whatever is emptiness is form*

In other words form and emptiness are co-extensive.

Following this Avalokitesvara makes the same claim for all aspects of personal consciousness, thus:

II *The same is true for sensation,
perceptions, memory (samskara) and
consciousness.*

On the face if it, this may well be a much more difficult pill to swallow than is the case for the claim made with respect to form. However, to pave the way for the systematic explanation that must follow it can be said that the aim of the exercise is to show, by negation, that even the characteristics of the ego are without true self-existing substance. Put another way, the ego is merely a work of fiction that is sustained by thought (acts of the mind) alone. Once form is disposed of the ego-mind follows.

For the sake of brevity the 1st & 2nd skandhas will be analysed directly to show the relationships and particularly with the first category mentioned in line 11 (sensation). The general thrust of the discussion will also hold for perceptions, memory and consciousness.

Beginning with the 1st skandha, "form" or "rupa", we may note that it was traditionally assigned a content consisting of the 4 secondary elements:

water, fire, air, & earth. These are, in turn, extracted from (have their cause in) the 4 primary elements: visciduity, energy, motility & divisibility. Thus from the characteristic of visciduity arises water, from energy ->fire, from motility ->air & from divisibility ->earth. These 4 secondary elements, may be termed "interpretive sensations", & are thus described as "unborn" since they depend on acts of mind. The first skandha is therefore not extant or non-extant, as is space. Note: space is not considered for use in this scheme since it is, from a phenomenological standpoint, 'unnecessary' because the sense of space, i.e. vacuity, leads only to space which cannot be directly detected by any of the senses. In the assemblage of the discriminative secondary elements, earth, air, fire & water plus their subdivisions and combinations, the term nama means 'by which we know things', & rupa means things known as "outside".

The second skandha is called vedana which means 'sensation' from vid - to know and it depends on experience in the evaluation of form. The elements of form represent the apparent apprehension of sensations by a conscious separation through the doorways representing the 5 sense organs. This consciousness "imagines that it feels externality". By means of the attachment of "expectations" to these sensations, which are induced by "habit-energy" (ancient memories or samscaras) the primary elements give rise to the resulting secondary elements (water, fire, air, earth). Through their

subdivisions and combinations a separable differentiation results and through the experience of sensation, the consciousness constructs its own prison out of its own reflection and eventually finds itself immersed in the world of name and form.

Hence we may see that the "appearance of an object" is not necessarily "concrete". Form is a mask that cannot be removed without revealing the identity of the object i.e. the mask of a table, of a coin (rupee) etc as true emptiness. It is a subjective or conceptual category to give meaning to the mind's conception of externality. It corresponds with "emptiness" as used in the sutra.

The 3rd skandha is "perception" or "sanja". San means "together" and jna means "to know". Perception depends on form and sensation.

The 4th skandha is "memory" or samskara. Sam (san) means together and kri means "to make" i.e. to put together. It depends on form, sensation & perception and is also sometimes termed predisposition, recollection, the expression of the "karmic genome" and so forth. It may also be described as resulting from impressions on the mind of acts done in former existence. And again, as resulting in the "mental conformation" with creations of the mind as in the production of an external world which is regarded as real though actually being non-existent. As a prefabricated set of guidelines from the past it may be held to account

for: intelligence, belief, shame, confidence, indolence, pride, anger, envy, sloth, repentance, doubt etc. It is sometimes poorly translated as “volition”.

The 5th skandha is consciousness or vijana. Vi means to divide and jana is knowledge. Thus consciousness is the knowledge that results from division. For division to take place there must first be separate discrimination thus consciousness depends on form, sensation, perception & memory.

Not yet satisfied with the lesson, Avalokitesvara proceeds further by saying:

12 "Shariputra/Sharadwatibu, the Characteristics of the emptiness [not self-existence (not self-existing existence)] of All Dharmas Are: Non-Arising, Non-Ceasing, Non-Defiled, Non-Pure, Non-Increasing, Non-Decreasing.

Here the term dharma is derived from dhri, to hold as reality. Thus a dharma is a mental construct having the validity of reality. Dharma is thus taken as a law, a law existing (or not-existing) in Buddha-consciousness (higher consciousness) implying no dependence on humanity for its presence. Dharmas were regarded (and are often so seen) as the building blocks of reality. Avalokitesvara, having removed the “absolute” status of dharmas then proceeds to negate all the commonly understood classifications

concerning consciousness and the realm of physicality as follows:

13 *"Therefore, in the emptiness [not self-existence (not self-existing existence)] There Are No Forms, No Feelings, Perceptions, Volitions or Consciousness.*

14 *"No Eye, Ear, Nose, Tongue, Body or Mind; No Form, Sound, Smell, Taste, Touch or Mind Object;*
15 *No Realm of the Eye, Until We Come to No realm of Consciousness."*

The six powers of sensation are: eyes, ears, skin, nose, mouth & mind; the 6 domains are of: color, sound, touch, smell, taste, & thought. Plus a further 6 kinds of consciousness (vijnana) i.e. visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, & conceptual (realms) generate a total of 18 elements comprising the operational senses. Not all of the 18 are mentioned but all 18 are meant. The first 12 items constitute the Abodes (i.e. the 6 pairs such as: eyes + colour, ears + sound, skin + touch, nose + smell, mouth + taste & mind + thought etc.).

Avalokitesvara continues as follows:

16 *"No ignorance and Also No Ending of Ignorance, Until We Come to No Old Age and Death and No Ending of Old Age and Death.*

The above line (# 16) refers to the 12 links of causation laid down by the Buddha as eliciting samsara (the endless cycle of birth & death) and the

cause suffering. The Chain of Dependent Origination – (pratitya-samupada) having 12-links – (dvadashanga) constitutes The Buddha's path to Enlightenment.

The links are:

- 1) Suffering, from whence does it arise?: it is caused by old age & death i.e. loss of the body.
- 2) Old age & Death, from whence does it arise?: it is caused by birth (jati) i.e. obtaining a body.
- 3) Birth, from whence does it arise?: it is caused by existence (bhava) i.e. consists of existence in the realms of form & formlessness.
- 4) Existence, from whence does it arise?: it is caused by attachment (upadana); attachment to desires, views, rules, & a self.
- 5) Attachment, from whence does it arise?: it is caused by thirst (trishna); thirst for the realms of desire, form, and the formless.
- 6) Thirst, from whence does it arise?: it is caused by sensation (vedana); pleasureable, painful & neutral.
- 7) Sensation, from whence does it arise?: it is caused by contact (sparsha); 6 kinds of sensory contact.
- 8) Contact, from whence does it arise?: it is caused by the abodes (ayatana); the 6 senses.
- 9) The Abodes, from whence do they arise?: they are caused by name & form (nama-rupa); the skanda of form & the 4 formless skandhas (see above).

- 10) Name & Form, from whence does it arise?: it is caused by consciousness (vijnana); the 6 forms of sensory consciousness (hearing, taste, touch, vision, smell, thought).
- 11) Consciousness, from whence does it arise?: it is caused by memory (Samskara); habitual patterns of speech, action & thought.
- 12) Memory, from whence does it arise?: it is caused by ignorance (avidya). Ignorance of cause & effect & also the way things are.

Meditation on this sequence leads one to nirvana.

Ignorance means to mistake the true for the false & the false for the true and it includes not only the absence of knowledge but the presence of delusion. In a formal sense the chain of causation starts with: Ignorance (which gives rise to)-> Memory-> Consciousness-> Name & Form-> Abodes-> Contact-> Sensation-> Thirst-> Attachment-> Existence-> Birth-> Old Age & Death-> Suffering (& repeats),

Memory & Ignorance (the 1st two links) come from Past Existences - Birth & Old Age (the last 2 links) are effects for future existence & together these 4 links may be said to constitute the "Soul". In an immediate sense, self is not obviated, but simply set-aside under a different "guise" & ignored. This is essential for the construct to be effective as the ego-self is thus rendered void.

The Chain of Dependent Origination does not have recourse to a “self” so a break between any of the links will disrupt the process & put an end to the chain of causation once & for all – which is what Buddha did through meditation thereby attaining Nirvana.

However, Avalokitesvara has baldly claimed (line 16) that there is no ignorance! But – if there is no ignorance how can there be an ending of ignorance? What is there that ends (dies)? Because its nature is “empty” we say “there is no ignorance”. But because of “true emptiness” (that is, the emptiness of “no ending of ignorance”) there is nothing that can end.

Likewise, if the 12 links of causation arise, then life & death can come to an end. But because causation does not arise, in that the nature of “no ending of life & death” is “empty” then the resulting true emptiness means that there is no end to life & death (i.e. old age & death). That is, the non-existence of the links of causation – does not exist. Thus Avalokitesvara having told Shariputra that in the light of Prajnaparamita the links of the chain do not exist, now tells him, in the same light, their non-existence likewise does not exist. Avalokitesvara continues in the same vein:

*17 Also, There is No Truth of Suffering, Of the Cause
of Suffering,
Of the Cessation of Suffering, Nor of the Path.*

The four noble truths are: 1) Life means suffering.: 2) The origin of suffering is attachment: 3) Cessation of suffering is attainable.: 4) There is a path to cessation of suffering. These are here negated by Avalokitesvara. Why? Because from the viewpoint of Prajnaparamita the mind is already (and always has been) pure and requires no improvement. Thus no external doctrines exist nor are they required since they are already contained within our very nature.

There is no suffering, source, relief or path. Suffering does not rise so how can it exist? Its source produces nothing so how can it be cut-off? Its relief relieves nothing so how can it be practiced? If there is someone who can practice then there must be a path to practice. But there is no person and no path for both individuals and Dharmas are empty in the light of Prajnaparamita. If the person does not exist where can there be suffering? To see this is to realise the truth of "suchness" (non-duality, transcendence, enlightenment etc.)

18 *There is No Wisdom, and There is No Attainment Whatsoever."*

19 *Because There is Nothing to Be Attained, The Bodhisattva Relying On Prajna Paramita Has No Obstruction in His Mind. Because There is No Obstruction, He Has no Fear,*

Attainment here means the attainment of nirvana. Here nirvana is held by Avalokitesvara to be something that is seen-through (and rejected) as the result of his insight obtained through prajnaparamita. Thus nirvana is not here held to be something permanent and pure.

Obstructions (Avarana) within the mind are also known as as “Barriers to spiritual life”. These barriers or walls are 3 fold consisting of: 1) Karma-avarana [walls of karma, i.e. all limiting circumstances]; 2) Klesha avarana [walls of passion, anger & desire]; 3) Jneya-avarana [walls of knowledge including all forms of delusion]. Delusions are of two forms: (1) thinking of thing, an obstruction etc. as existing when it does not exist and (2) thinking of something as non-existing when it does exist. Such ideas are sometimes called the “walls” of the mind. The meaning of line 16 is that Avalokitesvara operates with a perfectly clear mind, with mind absolute, “While Coursing in the Deep PrajnaParamita”.

*20 And He passes Far Beyond Confused
Imagination. And Reaches Ultimate Nirvana.*

By the term “ultimate nirvana” here is meant something more than nirvana as an absolute. The bodhisattva (Avalokitesvara) certainly reaches and experiences Nirvana in the fullest but he traverses (i.e. see line 2 – “coursing”) this state of consciousness, of ultimate Buddha Consciousness, of Buddha Mind. Having traversed the Buddha

Mind, Avalokitesvara is aware that samsara is merely an appearance and is not self-existent. That there are no reasons for bondage, there are no persons or beings in bondage (or otherwise). He realises furthermore, and that all beings are both one in the Buddha Mind and at once non-existent therein. However, the Bodhisattva none-the-less progresses to a higher state in the realisation of Compassion (as far as the worlds of sentient beings are concerned).

What, therefore, is the nature of this compassion? It is quite simply this: Avalokitesvara, instead of fixating on nirvana and plunging further therein, looks back for just an instant. In that instant he sees that not only is nirvana void of self-content but it is therefore no more real than samsara. In this realisation he is overwhelmed by a "compassion" that comes from totally experiencing and understanding the depths of pain and suffering felt by all sentient beings not privy to the insight just obtained. Thus Avalokitesvara returns to the recently vacated "world of name and form" to teach and alleviate suffering knowing full well the content of the option abandoned. This is the pathway of the Bhodisattva wherein the vow, to remain in samsara until the last sentient being is freed there-from, is embraced willingly. And why? Because it is now also known that the fiction of time is a product of mind, that it does not exist, and the task is therefore also without existence since it will take no time at all. This is the "supreme enlightenment" referenced by Avalokitesvara in the next line (# 21).

21 *The Buddhas of the Past, Present and Future, By Relying on Prajna Paramita Have Attained Supreme Enlightenment.*

22 *Therefore, the Prajna Paramita is the Great Magic Spell, The Spell of Illumination, the Supreme Spell, Which Can Truly Protect One From All Suffering Without Fail.*

23 *Therefore He Uttered the Mantra of Prajnaparmita:*

*Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha.
Gone, Gone, Gone beyond, gone utterly beyond. Oh,
what an Awakening!*

Prajnaparamita: Perfection of wisdom. Para - before, ita - gone, paramita - "what has gone beyond", that which is transcendent, that leads us to the other shore of samsara, the great deep ocean of suffering.

It is a deep samaadhi from which "compassion" itself arises in the minds of all being(s). It is also called "the womb of the Buddhas" and sometimes depicted as a female entity (not surprisingly) upon which meditation may be focused by those interested in achieving this state for themselves.

Shunya, Shunyata: In the Mahayana, emptiness refers to the absence of self or ego in the mind and in its external projections. Refers to the fact that all

conceptual frameworks are empty of any reality, of a solid and unchanging essence. Also refers to the absolute and pure quality of mind. Emptiness is the central theme of prajnaparamita texts and madhyamika philosophy. The meaning is thus "not space" but something like the opposite. That is, the absence of the falsely conceived space between entities of the mind or those of the material world created by discrimination.

Goldenage: December 30, 2006

