

Heart of the Perfect Wisdom

Thus have I heard. At one time the Blessed One was dwelling at Vulture Peak Mountain, together with a great gathering of monks, nuns and bodhisattvas. At that time the Blessed One entered into the Samadhi on the enumeration of phenomena called “Appearance of the Profound.”

The Heart Sutra is the summary and distillation of the methods contained in all the larger Perfect Wisdom Sutras. It is one of the spiritual treasures of humankind. Taking the view ‘emptiness’ is the primary method.

The Perfection of Wisdom is the method of the Goddess Prajna Paramita that removes all cognitive impediments to Enlightenment.

Vulture Peak is a natural amphitheater in India where Shakyamuni Buddha gave many of his teachings.

The Samadhi (deep concentration) that the Buddha enters entails the enumeration of dharmas (the phenomena of experience). This mirrors the emptiness of phenomena that Avalokita is about to teach to Shariputra.

At the same time the noble Avalokiteshvara, the Great Being, was engaging in the practice of the profound Perfection of Wisdom and clearly saw the 5 skandhas to be empty of any essential nature.

Avalokiteshvara is the bodhisattva of great compassion. Known as Kuan Yin in East Asia, this bodhisattva here represents the wisdom of the Mahayana.

He expounds it to Shariputra of the older school, considered the wisest of Buddha's direct disciples. Shariputra and his friend Mahamaudgalyayna were the 2 chief disciples of the Buddha. Shariputra, the 'son of Shari' had mastered what later became the Abhidharma system, describing a process of arising and ceasing phenomena (the "dharmas"). Clearly cognizant of the non-existence of a self or ego, Shariputra had the 5 skandhas thoroughly in view and was adept at the enumeration of phenomena, the enumeration of 75 or so different kinds of "dharmas"

Then, by the inspiration of the Buddha, venerable Shariputra said to noble Avalokiteshvara, "Wishing to practice the profound Perfection of Wisdom, how should a son or daughter of good lineage train?"

This key question begins the dialog between the two. Again it is practice that is emphasized: take the view that everything is empty of essential nature, insubstantial, not quite real.

The noble Avalokiteshvara replied to venerable Shariputra "O Shariputra, a son or daughter of good lineage, who wishes to practice the profound Perfection of Wisdom should discern in this way: view the 5 skandhas to be empty of essential nature.

Appearance is emptiness and emptiness is appearance. Appearance is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than appearance. Whatever is appearance, that is emptiness. Whatever is emptiness, that is appearance. In the same way feeling, recognition, karmic formations and consciousness are emptiness.

The 5 “skandhas”: these ‘heaps’, these ‘aggregates’ are 5 categories of instantaneous phenomena called dharmas. Several of the 75 kinds of dharmas arise and cease in every moment, a process that transcends all concepts of an ego or a self. The dharmas could be called “atoms of experience”, and the moments could be called “molecules of experience”. These dharmas are the fundamental constituents of the abhidharma system of the original teachings. These phenomena are thought by many in the older school to be real, having an ‘essential nature’ (svabhava, ‘own being’).

The 5 skandhas that are empty of essential nature:

1. form, appearance. “rupa”
what appears to the sight, and by extension, the other sense objects; the realm of matter.
2. feeling. ”vedana” positive, negative or neutral reaction to a sense contact.
3. perception, recognition. Samjna-

the entire process of sense perception from sense contact up to recognition and naming of an object.

4. karmic formations, impulses.”samskaras”.
motivating factors. 50 or so different kinds of phenomena, of dharmas. There are 10 ‘omnipresent factors’, 11 virtuous dharmas, 28 “kleshas”, negative emotions, non- virtuous dharmas, and a few ‘not associated with mind’, such as space and time.

5. consciousness, “vijnana”
activities of the dualistic mind, a mill of concepts

Emptiness refers to the total interdependence of everything, the “interbeing” of all phenomena. It is not nothing, nor is it something. Taking the view of emptiness entails the destruction of all concepts and pre-conceived notions. Concepts become more and more subtle, until, at the Realization of emptiness, there are no concepts and no views. This is called the View, no view.....

Here, O Shariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness. They have no characteristics. There is no arising and no cessation. There is no purity and no impurity. There is no increase and no decrease.

Each dharma, each phenomenon has a mark or characteristic that indicates its essential nature, its own- being (svabhava), Here Avalokita points out that phenomena are

interdependent. They have no being of their own, they are empty of essential nature. As emptiness, they have no characteristics.

No arising and no cessation (of momentary dharmas),
No purity and no impurity, no decrease and no increase:
Three conceptual distinctions in the abhidharma system are shown to be empty.

Therefore, Shariputra, in emptiness there is no appearance, no feeling, no perception, no karmic formation, no consciousness; no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no appearance, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no phenomena. There is no eye element up to no mind element, and so on, up to no mind consciousness element.

All concepts of the sensory world are shown to be empty of essential nature. There are no skandhas in emptiness, no six senses (the conceptual mind, vijñāna, is considered to be a 6th sense with phenomena (dharmas) as object); no 6 sense objects, no 6 sense consciousnesses. The 18 dhatus are empty of essential nature.

Then, the teachings themselves are shown to be empty: they are mere constructs.

There is no ignorance and no extinction of ignorance up to no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death. There is no suffering, no cause of suffering, no cessation of

suffering and no path. No wisdom, no attainment and no non-attainment.

The 12 links of dependent arising are empty; they have no self entity. Thus: no ignorance, no karmic formation, no consciousness, no names and form (5skandhas), no 6 sense bases, no sense contact, no feeling reaction, no craving, no grasping, no becoming, no birth, no aging and death. Also no extinction of ignorance, etc. Likewise, the 4 Noble Truths do not exist in emptiness.

Therefore, Shariputra, because the Bodhisattvas have no attainment, they rely on the Perfection of Wisdom. Since there is no obscuration of mind, there is no fear. They transcend all error and attain complete Nirvana, passing beyond the bounds of sorrow.

When the mind is not obscured, no fear can exist. There are 2 kinds of obscuration: the coarse obscuration of the afflictions, the negative emotions (kleshas), and the more subtle cognitive obscurations, wrong views. “Error” refers to the four ‘upside down views’, the over-throwers of inner calm: all attempts to find (in Samsara) permanence in what is intrinsically impermanent; to find happiness in what is intrinsically suffering; to find beauty in what is intrinsically repulsive; to find selfhood where there is no self.

All the Buddhas of the three times, by means of Perfect Wisdom, have fully awakened to the utmost true and complete Enlightenment.

They attain “anutara samyak sam Bodhi”. This is the ‘realm of Nirvana which leaves nothing behind’.

Therefore the mantra of the Perfection of Wisdom is the great mantra, the mantra of great knowledge, the unsurpassed mantra, the mantra equal to the unequaled, the mantra that thoroughly pacifies all suffering. It is true because it is not false. The mantra of the Perfection of Wisdom is said in this way:

**Om Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha
(Om, Gone, Gone, Gone Beyond,
Gone Totally Beyond, Awakening, So Be It)**

This mantra rhythms Enlightenment, and also is a reminder of the 5 Paths of a Mahayana Bodhisattva. Thus the first Gate (pronounced “gateh”) refers to the Path of Accumulation, where one practices Dharma to gather up enough merit and wisdom to embark on the journey of Enlightenment. The second Gate is for the Path of Linking, the path of intense practice. Paragate reminds us of the Path of Seeing, where the first full realization of emptiness takes place. Parasamgate refers to the long stage of the Path of Cultivation, the Path of Meditation. The Path corresponding to “Bodhi”, ‘awakening’ is called the Path of No More Learning.

Then the Blessed One arose from that Samadhi and commended noble Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhsattva, the Great Being: “Well done O son of good lineage, thus it is.

One should practice the profound Perfection of Wisdom just as you have taught and all the Tathagatas will rejoice.

After the Blessed One thus spoke, venerable Shariputra, noble Avalokiteshvara, and the world with its gods, humans, asuras and gandharvas rejoiced and praised the words of the Blessed One.

Here the Buddha approves this teaching on emptiness and enjoins people to practice the method of Prajna Paramita. The whole world rejoices, even the Asuras, the contentious demi gods and the gandharvas, the subtle beings who feed only on incense vapors and make wonderful music.

The Heart Sutra is the definitive exposition of emptiness. It is widely chanted in many languages, both Asian and Western. Along with the Diamond Sutra, it is considered to be the entrance to the vast literature of the Perfect Wisdom Sutras.

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