

# **An Introduction to the Heart Sutra**

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## An Introduction to the Heart Sutra

The topic of the Heart Sutra is one of the most extraordinarily complex and profound topics. So, I thought it was funny enough asking *me* to say something about it (laughter), but to want to finish it in one evening—that’s even funnier or should I say extraordinary (more laughter). But let’s see what we can do.

There are many wonderful translations of the mahayana text that we fondly call *The Heart Sutra*, or *Prajnaparamita Sutra*, as it is also known. If you have your own copy of the text, you can refer to it as we go along.

Anyone who has any understanding of this text knows that it is not particularly material for study. The Heart Sutra is in part a recitation—not so much a prayer, as a verbal reminder of the quintessence of Buddhadharma. In this sense, it could be said to be the very core of the Buddhist teachings. When newcomers ask about what Buddhadharma is or what Buddhists are trying to do, a good answer would be to hand them a copy of the Prajnaparamita text. Of course, when they read that there are no eyes, no ears, no mouth, no nose, and so on, they might find this a bit “over the top.” They might say they don’t understand this at all—which is precisely the point! That’s what Buddhism is trying to do. (Laughter)

I say this is because the Heart Sutra is based on Arya Avalokiteshvara’s own deep reflection on the perfection of wisdom. To *study* the Heart Sutra you have to study Madhyamika and the great works of the masters such as Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, Aryadeva, and so forth. The Madhyamika study of the views allows you to go into the different versions of the Prajnaparamita Sutra. The sutra we are referring to here is one of the shortest sutras. Some much longer ones are sutras in 10,000 stanzas, 15,000 stanzas, 18,000 stanzas, 25,000 stanzas, 80,000 stanzas, and 100,000 stanzas—along with volumes and volumes of elaborate commentaries. All these versions are concentrated in the form that we call the Heart Sutra.

### The Title of the Text

The full title of the Heart Sutra in Sanskrit is *Bhagavati Pragyana-paramita Hridaya Sutra*. Because the term *bhagavati* has a strong connotation of “goddess” or “mother principle,” prajnaparamita is often referred to as the “Mother of all Buddhas,” and is given the form of a female deity. But if you go beyond the form, the Sanskrit word *bhagavati*—which is actually two words—has a much deeper sense of “nature” and something “in union.” The *bhagavati* principle is the union of two forces, pristine wisdom and skilful means, whose inseparability is the fundamental nature. Hence, the term “*bhagavati*.”

*Prajna*, which is how most of you pronounce the Sanskrit *pragyan*, is often translated as “wisdom.” And *paramit*, as in *prajnaparamita*, refers to the “wisdom beyond the realm of conventional reality.” If seen within the framework of intellectual knowledge, prajnaparamita would have the fault of becoming conceptual. And because a concept is always the basis of an argument, you would then have to argue about whose wisdom is better, and why my wisdom or your wisdom is better. Ultimate wisdom is beyond the realm of conventional reality and conventional intellectualization. Thus, prajnaparamita has the connotation of being the peak, or summit, of wisdom.

The third word, *bridaya*, often pronounced *brideh*, means “heart.” The heart, or core, is very direct and simple. The last word, *sutra*, is a “chain,” or “continuum.” So the title, *Bhagavati Pragyana-paramita Hridaya Sutra*, refers to the continuum of the essence, or nature, beyond conventional reality and

intellectualization. The deep samadhi that Arya Avalokiteshvara rested in was the continuum of that core essence: the nature of all phenomena, beyond the needs, confines, and limitations of conventional reality.

The last two words of the title, *Hridaya Sutra*, or Heart Sutra, then became the prevalent nickname of this very exceptional text.

The text consists of three main characters: the bodhisattva Arya Avalokiteshvara, Shariputra, and the Buddha, himself. It is basically a dialogue, or question-and-answer, between Arya Avalokiteshvara and the protagonist, Shariputra. This is how the Heart Sutra comes about: the responses of Arya Avalokiteshvara to the questions of Shariputra *are* the Heart Sutra.

### **The Buddha's Silence**

The Buddha is present throughout the text, but he doesn't speak. Except for the conclusion of the text where the Buddha says, "Excellent, excellent. This is how it is..." thus affirming the absolute truth of what was said, he is silent. The Buddha's silence is one of the most remarkable aspects of Heart Sutra and forms a fundamental principle of Buddhadharma.

Now, those of you who have practiced Buddhism know that many different approaches are taught according to the diverse capacities and potentials of human beings. These differences *do* invade what we call Buddhist philosophy, which is taught in diverse ways; and all the various practices, paths, philosophies, and teachings are relevant. But just as many rivulets collect into one ocean, the many diverse aspects of Buddhadharma all gather into the single ocean of silence.

This is not a passive silence. Silence, here, is a term used for the insight and courage to go beyond conventional thinking—particularly the conventional assumption that answers are found on the basis of intellectualization.

### **The Samadhi of the Perfection of Wisdom**

The first verse of the text begins with "Thus have I heard" and usually ends with "He saw the five skandhas to be empty of nature." It refers, in particular, to Arya Avalokiteshvara in deep samadhi. What kind of deep meditation or introspection was Arya Avalokiteshvara abiding in? The mahayana Madhyamika teachings call that samadhi "seeing" or "recognizing" the fundamental nature.

Now, it is always very difficult to use the word seeing when speaking about a topic such as the Heart Sutra. The problem being that the English word seeing depends upon a subject and object—and with a subject comes a seer, with an object there is something to be seen.

Seeing, here, means "seeing just as it is," independent of a subject or object. Without that misunderstanding, seeing is just the freedom to see. "Realizing" is another word we often use in Buddhist philosophy. This word must also be used without any connotation of a realizer or something to realize. So, too, the word "awakening."

The samadhi that Avalokiteshvara was abiding in was an awakening without an awaken-er or anything to awaken one. His awakening was to recognize the basic, fundamental nature of self and all phenomena "as it is," without any kind of projection or assumption. Seeing the true nature of self and of all perceptible phenomena and not deviating from that is called "Avalokiteshvara abiding in the samadhi of the perfection of wisdom."

What the first verse is referring to is an awareness of the fundamental nature of things—and Avalokiteshvara’s undistracted recognition of this, which is referred to as *prajnaparamita* or, loosely translated, the “perfection of wisdom.”

### **The Path of Authentic Buddhadharmā**

The point here is to understand that what you are trying to recognize when you contemplate or study the Heart Sutra is none other than what Avalokiteshvara was trying to see: the true nature of self and others—and then resting in that awareness of natural reality.

Thus the Prajnaparamita Sutra became not only the foundation of the mahayana teachings, but also the holder of the core essence of all Buddhist teachings. So, when reciting and reflecting on the Heart Sutra, remember to evoke its meaning in your meditation. This will allow you to really walk the path of authentic Buddhadharmā.

If this is not understood then, sadly, you may quite likely become a victim of all the superficial dharma so prevalent today. Not that there is any intention to bring about modification or fabrication of dharma, but we all know that dharma is handled by people like you and I. We invest a lot of ourselves into the path of practice, and the tendency to contort the dharma to suit our own expectations is a difficult seduction to resist. At what point do we get caught in the trappings of superficial dharma—which is what’s happening today? This must be very carefully observed and examined.

In the beginning, most people searching for spiritual insight have very authentic motivation. Of course, there are always those with nothing better to do, who think “Maybe I should become a Buddhist for a while,” and those who come into Buddhism reluctantly because of parents, brothers, sisters, spouses, or partners who won’t marry them unless they do. Several friends of mine have grudgingly become meditators because that was their partners’ condition for marriage. But those are the exceptions.

Most people searching for some spiritual insight begin with very authentic motivation. That motivation may not be very well formulated or articulated in their minds. If you ask them why they meditate, they may say they don’t know. But even in the inability to articulate it, there is a deep longing for something pure, something good that they would like to realize and achieve.

However five, ten, or fifteen years into it—things get worse. As you “age” in the Buddhadharmā, you can get sidetracked. That first intention that was so pure it couldn’t even be articulated somehow decreases or become seduced by the agendas and ambitions we bring into meditation.

### ***Restless Mind of Ambitions and Agendas***

Unless your practice is constantly analyzed, examined, and made sure of—through your own efforts and through the blessings of the gurus and the many teachings you have received—it is very easy to get caught in ambition on the path of practice.

The very simple ambitions that prevail in the East are about having a long life with good health, wealth and prosperity, and no obstacles. They are very orthodox and systematic in their approach: a buddhafield would be best; but if not, then a good next life nearer to the teacher, with a better chance, an earlier start. This is the “wish list.”

In the West it is a bit different. Interestingly, when I first came to the West, people were constantly telling me to be sure to give them “Buddhadharma,” not Tibetan culture. They felt that Tibetans were very orthodox and very theistic in their approach. What attracted westerners to the path of dharma was the nontheistic approach. Very well. That’s very nice. (Laughter)

Twenty-five years later, however, the gears seemed to have shifted. While not as dogmatic or theistic as the East, westerners today come up with all these feelings: feelings of “connections,” feelings of well being—and that “goodness” thing you have, a sort of blissed-out state. Of course, one can’t generalize, but you now seem to be doing much worse than the Tibetans. We at least think about the next life! You are content with some sensory experience in this life. It doesn’t even go very far into old age. It is all about now. Isn’t it? (Laughter)

Beyond just joking about this, if you look at what is happening, East and West, it is very sad. The real power of dharma—which happens to be a path of cessation of suffering, not only for oneself but for all—is not being tapped into. Instead, your whole reason for engaging in practice gets seduced into some singular and very temporary ambition.

Of course, what Buddhist meditator does not want cessation of suffering for all sentient beings? We all talk about liberating sentient beings. It is a good thought. But *do* take time to look into your mind and see how convinced you are about this. Will it happen? You don’t know—and actually you don’t much care, as long as you have a good session. As long as your mind is relaxed and wise, as long as you can handle some emotional problem more sensibly, like a kind of self-therapy that will save you from having to pay a therapist.

The point here is that superficial dharma is very limited. Of course, you may say, “I’m not in this to liberate others or to gain enlightenment for myself. That’s not my criteria. I would be very satisfied with a basically mindful life that serves as a foundation of happiness for myself and others.” I recently met a lady who said just that: “I’m not looking for enlightenment. It’s too tough and I don’t think I can do it. I just want some happiness for myself, my family, and all others who relate to me.”

That is wonderful. There is a level of honesty in that. To be honest about a relative, systematic, nontheistic-but-actually-theistic approach is fine. And I appreciate the mushrooming of dharma centers that provide such methods—the same way we have Pilates and yoga classes, meditation classes, singing classes, and all those laughter classes. Those are all very good.

My problem is with those who, like myself, claim to understand something about enlightenment, cessation, and absolute truth, but who can’t cut ties with the subterfuge of personal ambition. We sit in meditation pretending that if we don’t think about it, ambition isn’t there. We’re like the child with chocolate cake all over its face, claiming not to know who ate the cake.

We need to observe ourselves as we sit in meditation trying to work with truth, nonattachment, selflessness, and letting go. Is that moment of compassion beyond a self-cherishing agenda really free of the momentum of restlessness? This restless momentum is the ambition of sustaining the self—to such a degree that we can’t let go of thinking *I* see realization; *I* am generating compassion; or, compassion is difficult—or easy—for *me*. Everything that should be without an agenda of a self is actually revolving like a satellite around the self’s ambition and agenda.

At this point, there is no comprehension of the very quintessence of the mahayana teachings. Reciting the Heart Sutra allows you to bring that back into your own reflection.

Traditionally, especially in the Japanese tradition, the Heart Sutra is recited as often as possible. There is also a wonderful practice of writing the Heart Sutra in beautiful calligraphy. Oftentimes if you are very used to reading it, you may be just muttering words without really reflecting on them. In the practice of writing out the Heart Sutra—no matter which of the various traditions you use—each word evokes awareness within you. This allows you to not be seduced into superficial approaches to Buddhadharma, which amount to nothing but a tremendous waste of your effort and potential.

The Prajnaparamita Sutra refers back, again and again, to the quintessential Buddhadharma of remaining in deep understanding of the natural truth—and not doing anything much beyond that.

### ***Resting Mind in Natural Truth***

Resting the mind in a deepened awareness of the natural truth is the whole emphasis of all the various Buddhist teachings, whether in the Theravada tradition, the Zen tradition, or particularly the analytical approach of shamatha, vipashyana, and mahayana Madhyamika school. We see it later, with further elaboration, in the various trainings of Mahamudra and Dzogchen. The emphasis is on not doing anything much beyond resting the mind in awareness of the nature of things as they truly are. From recognizing this absolutely come many different anecdotes and references.

One such reference to keep in mind is in the *Vajracchedika Sutra*, or *Diamond Sutra*, as it is more popularly known. The Diamond Sutra closely resembles the Heart Sutra teachings. In it, Subhuti struggles to understand the reality of perception. His reflection and analysis have to do with the nature of mind and perceptible objects. What is the nature of the perceiving mind? What is the relationship between the perceiving mind and perceived objects? At the conclusion of the text, there is a conversation between Subhuti and Buddha Shakyamuni that is considered to be the very soul of the Diamond Sutra. After a whole afternoon in conversation, the Buddha asks Subhuti, “Have you understood?” Subhuti answers, “I have understood.” Then the Buddha asks, “Has the teacher taught today?” And Subhuti says, “No, you have not taught.” To which the Buddha replies, “Absolutely right. You have finally understood.”

In the vajrayana tradition, Tilopa says that ultimate abiding in the “nature as is” requires the meditator not to meditate, not to “see,” not to think, not to express, not to perceive, not to recognize or know. Simply abide.

In the Dzogchen tradition, we find Padmasambhava saying the same thing. When Yeshe Tsogyal asks how to practice the dharma authentically, and how to be absolutely sure one’s meditation is not fabricated dharma, Padmasambhava replies:

*Do not do anything: do not follow, do not think, do not conceptualize,  
do not articulate or express anything.  
Do not do anything.  
With nothing to see, nothing to follow, nothing to abide in—  
Simply let be.*

What Padmasambhava is specifically pointing out here is that one is *not* enlightened through fabricated dharmas. One needs to understand dharma beyond fabrication. One will never be enlightened through indicated dharma; one needs a dharma beyond indications. One will never be enlightened through expressed dharma; one needs a dharma beyond expression.

Throughout Buddhist history, all of the teachings and various methods emphasize this one thing: ultimately, you will understand when you can let go and abide in a state of absolute openness and natural ease.

### ***Giving Yourself a Break***

*To understand the core essence Buddhadharma, the only thing asked of you is to give yourself a break. Give yourself a break from thinking you have to do it, see it, achieve it, change it, or bring it to fruition. Give a break to the deep arrogance that assumes this world wouldn't know how to function without you.... All the Buddhist teachings and methods come to this single point: Just sit still.*

For someone new to these teachings, how could one simplify all that we've spoken of so far? To understand the core essence Buddhadharma, the only thing asked of you is to give yourself a break. Give yourself a break from thinking you have to do it, see it, achieve it, change it, or bring it to fruition. Give a break to the deep arrogance that assumes this world wouldn't know how to function without you. You may not think about your world that way, but watch your behavior patterns. This is why all the Buddhist teachings and methods come to one single point: just sit still.

Now, this sounds nice. But what is really being said here is that our physical movement isn't needed all that much. Without it, you may suppose nothing would function. But try it. You will see that others around you are happier when you do not interfere in their lives. When you just sit still and, most importantly, just keep quiet. Silence is the best thing you can do for anyone else. (Laughter) The instigating factor behind all of our interfering is the chattering mind. Give your mind a break. Free it from the supposition that its interference and modifications are constantly needed.

The momentum of restlessness and discontent is created by apprehension. You assume you would be at a loss without that restlessness, so you provide yourself with situations in which you are constantly restless. But they don't actually work the way you hoped, which creates further discontent, which then boomerangs back as further interference and restlessness.

As a meditator, watch this constant sense of discontent and restlessness. Watch the anxiety that projects itself in the form of a speedy body, speedy speech, and speedy mind. This is basically what we are and how we live our lives—and what better example of this restless body, speech, and mind than being here in New York?

All this is in the hope of satisfying your quest for happiness, contentment, peace, and fulfillment. When it doesn't, you become insecure. You then try to evade that insecurity by more restlessness of body, speech, and mind. Seeing this rhythm, someone like Arya Avalokiteshvara begins to question it. Is it the outward movement that proliferates restlessness? Are you drowning out your basic sanity and subsuming your awareness in a powerful whirlwind of activity? If so, it will probably not fulfill your aspiration for peace and harmony.

### **The Four Seals: Keys to Genuine Peace**

A questioning mind such as that of Arya Avalokiteshvara begins to ponder the words of the Buddha, who presented the Buddhadharma of his own realization through the "four seals":

1. All phenomena are impermanent by nature.

2. All contaminated phenomena are the sources of discontentment.
3. All phenomena are devoid of an inherent permanent existence, or self.
4. Cessation or nirvana is utter peace.

When Arya Avalokiteshvara was in deep reflection, he was probably contemplating the path of the four seals. Through contemplating the four seals, the mind begins to truly understand the fundamental nature of things as they are: they are impermanent in nature; they are not singular entities; suppositions to the contrary lead to restlessness and discontent; and freeing oneself from these three misunderstandings is the key to genuine peace. The unfolding of this understanding manifests in one's realization as "samadhi." This is the samadhi that our Arya Avalokiteshvara was in. When reflection on the four seals manifests as an awakening to the true nature, it is said to be prajnaparamita.

The four seals are explained from the Madhyamika perspective as follows.

### ***1. All Phenomena are Impermanent by Nature***

In the Madhyamika teachings, the four seals are taught by simply observing things. Take your hand, for example. Without reflecting on the truth of the four seals, you would suppose it to be permanent. The hand you have today is the same hand you had yesterday and will have tomorrow. It is the hand you were born with. But that's not true, is it? You can see that the hand you were born with and the hand you had twenty-five years ago are definitely not the same.

Reflect upon the first seal and ask yourself: Are the things you think of as permanent really permanent? Look at your own hand and see. From a Buddhist perspective, this is not a denigration of the hand; it is a very gentle way of appreciating the fact that the rather wrinkled hand of today is not the hand of twenty-five years ago. There is a sense of change.

### ***2. All Contaminated Phenomena are Sources of Discontent***

From the Madhyamika perspective, looking at the hand and even calling it a "hand" is actually cruel. It is very ungenerous of you to not understand the wholeness of the situation. You would get very upset at work, for example, if a manager took credit for the hard work of many people. You would say, "That's not just!" and hold up signs and go on strike. That is an analogy for the injustice of crediting the hand with being a hand, without taking the wholeness of the situation into consideration. That designation could only be given because (1) you don't have time to think more about it, or (2) it's the most convenient thing to say. When we're in a rush, we say things like "you look good" or "you're very bad," without considering whether or not our opinions are justified.

Now, back to the hand. The madhyamikan would say it is just an H-A-N-D. If you look carefully, there is no hand. You have a thumb, an index finger, and middle, ring, and pinky fingers. You have skin, nerves, bone, tissues, muscles, joints, and fluids, and front and back parts. Which part would you associate with an independent hand? Wouldn't a clever person take time to appreciate this? Not that you can't *say* "hand"—but you should also develop a pervasive understanding of how many things go into building up that hand.

The Buddhist perspective of impermanence is never a deprecation of permanence. It just allows you to think more openly and pervasively about things. If I were to ask how many of you would like to be kinder and more sensible, you would all raise your hands—and that is probably how you feel. But it will never happen if you don't change your outlook on things. You can't say things like "I want to



be kind, but I'm moving too quickly"; or, "It's inconvenient to look at things correctly. I'll be kind when it's convenient"; or "They'll just have to keep up with my speed—and understand that when I say the hurtful things, I don't mean any harm."

We all say such things. It is a habit born from a very linear perspective, for no other reason than it suits you and it's convenient. When suitability and convenience become the motives for subjecting others to your opinions, physical actions, and verbal speech, that is when you have to turn to religion to become kinder. That is when you have to do things like lock yourself up in caves or small shacks called "retreat cabins," and have gurus, and spend time in rooms like this. Now, this room is very pretty—but you are actually sitting here on a beautiful evening, to become a better human being. There couldn't be a bigger joke on you than this.

You have gotten yourself into this situation for only one reason: your linear perspective. Your inability to see things as they truly are allows you to live in that speed that sustains your suppositions about things. This is good, that's bad; this is right, that's wrong; he's a better person than that other one; they're rich, those others are poor; and the Upper Eastside is better than—What's the opposite?—the Lower Westside. (Laughter)

All this discrimination—the biases, selfishness, stinginess, aggression, divisiveness, hatred, competitiveness, jealousy, anger, desire, bitterness, and strong confusion—is the result of one simple thing: a linear perspective.

How do you teach a person this? You teach them to look at a hand and see that this hand is impermanent.

### ***3. All Phenomena are Devoid of an Inherent Permanent Existence, or Self***

The third factor sees that there is no independent hand. You can still call it a hand, but with a better perspective you know it is a coming together of many different things. In and of itself, there is no hand. You can say, "I like this hand," and appreciate all the factors that go into this composite thing you temporarily label a "hand." But in the same way the hand can be understood to be impermanent, it can be understood to be composite. The hand is dependent on many causes and conditions. It is a *part* of something: a part of your body, your shoulder and arm. Because it does not exist independently, it has to be seen as part of your whole self.

I think it was Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche who said, anyone who buys something called "hand lotion" is someone who assumes the hand to be independent of the body. (Laughter) Now, most of you probably don't use face cream on your hands, do you? You have hand cream, lip cream, eye cream, foot cream, and so on—which just pinpoints the way we see everything as real.

If you feel you don't understand these three fundamental points, reflect on your own life. Things are always changing, but you try to reverse that. You suppose things to be permanent, and you live trying to sustain that supposition.

In a recent news article, the Russian president Vladimir Putin was speaking on how to prolong youth. It will be interesting—and hopefully we live long enough—to see how successful he is. Many of us think like this. We talk about how by 2025 the average human life span could be 130 years, and we constantly try to go against impermanence and change. But those holding on the tightest will feel impermanence and change more poignantly than those who are more relaxed. A good example of this is a long holiday weekend. If you are feeling very possessive of your holiday weekend, that

Friday, Saturday, and Sunday will change into Monday very quickly. Whereas back on the job, Friday is just Friday and Saturday and Sunday seem longer. The tighter you hold on, the more you are swimming against the current. This increases the restlessness and anxiety we've been talking about—and with continuous anxiety and feelings of apprehension, you assume things to be what they are not.

The second seal says that the source of our discontent is “contaminated phenomena”—if for no other reason than the effort it takes to keep our imputations alive. When we don't understand that many, many factors go into the building up of things, we tend to either “praise or blame.” But the basis of our praise and blame is incomplete, because it is born from a linear perspective.

So many things go into the birth of any circumstance. If you look carefully, you cannot really justify giving praise or blame, credit or discredit, the way you so freely do. Because your imputations and opinions are not in keeping with the nature of things, there will always be an undercurrent of dissatisfaction. And because they are posited on assumptions, you have to be very careful to justify your version of things. This only increases the restlessness and aggressiveness with which you stubbornly hold on—which is the build up of arrogance and ego.

Instead, as the third seal says, you need to look at things as they really are. *Nothing* is as independent as it may seem; everything is the coming together of many different parts. Just like the hand—beyond the label and the hundreds of parts that make it up—is not a real separate, independent entity. This same understanding pertains to everything you look at, listen to, or articulate in your mind.

When we say something is “good”—beyond G-O-O-D, where is there an independent thing called “good” that you can hold on to and not only believe in, but also insist everyone else believe in? The more stubbornly you posit that belief, the more animosity and competitiveness you create. And with this assertion of self, the more ego and arrogance increase.

Therefore the madhyamikans say to contemplate the hand or any such structure, to mature the mind into a sympathetic attitude that allows all circumstances to be impermanent and composite, mere labels beyond which is nothing more than the absolute nature of emptiness.

#### **4. Cessation is Nirvana, or Peace**

In the beginning of text we read, “The Blessed One entered the samadhi that expresses the dharma called Profound Illumination.” This is the samadhi we have been talking about. While practicing the profound prajnaparamita, the bodhisattva mahasattva saw in this way:

*He saw the five skandhas to be empty of nature.*

Now, in the English text there is one word missing: the Tibetan word *yung*, which is most often translated as “even” or “also.” With this word read in the translation, you could say:

*At that very time as well, Holy Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva, the great being,  
beheld the practice of the profound perfection of wisdom.  
And he saw even the five aggregates as empty of inherent nature.*

The word *yung* is so very important to the Heart Sutra because it reveals the process of Avalokiteshvara's insight. Reflecting on the Buddha's four seals, he saw that all compounded

phenomena are impermanent; all contaminated phenomena are sources of discontentment; all phenomena are empty of self. Reflecting in this way brings cessation, or peace.

The fourth seal is nirvana or utter peace. Upon reflection, Avalokiteshvara saw even the five skandhas to be empty by nature. Here “even” implies that having worked with the four seals, he then applies that same analysis and recognition of the nature to form, feeling, perception, formation, and consciousness: the five skandhas that make up who we are today.

### **The Emptiness Nature of the Five Skandhas**

In English the five skandhas are often called five aggregates. These five are the basic ground from which everything arises, not only our individual being but also all external phenomena.

Avalokiteshvara’s insight here—having seen that everything is impermanent, everything is composite, and nothing is an independent entity—is to see that this also applies to the five aggregates, or skandhas.

A very simple analogy for the five skandhas again uses the example of the hand. The first skandha is form. What do we mean by that? When your hand touches fire, your hand and the fire are both considered to be form aggregates.

The second skandha, the feeling aggregate, is said to be that subtle moment when the hand feels the fire. Feeling is therefore considered to be the origin of touch. When you look at something, your eyes “touch” a form. When you hear a sound, the ear consciousness, or ear sensibility, touches the objective source of the sound. That moment when the sense organ and sense object “touch” is the second skandha, feeling.

The third skandha, perception, is a further elaboration of feeling. Here the hand actually feels the particular sensation of the fire’s heat. This is considered to be the perception skandha.

The fourth skandha is usually translated into English as “formation.” But this needs to imply a reflexive response or reaction. A reflex is something you do without thinking: a habit. A reaction is also something done again and again out of familiarity. In responding to whatever conditions arise, these reflexive and reactive characteristics cooperate with one another. The formation skandha is defined by these very habitual reactions to things. Using the analogy of the hand and the fire, formation is the momentum—the force or energy—that brings the hand to the fire or the fire to the hand. Either way, their coming together is called the formation skandha.

The fifth skandha, consciousness, could be said to be the “Ouch!” when the hand and fire come together. Being able to recognize and articulate that is the consciousness skandha.

The analytic approach of the mahayana breaks down the five core factors that make up all animate and inanimate phenomena. Thus the Heart Sutra says that Avalokiteshvara saw *even* the skandhas to be empty in nature.

It is for you to think whether there could possibly be anything beyond the five aggregates. Is there anything—animate or inanimate—that is not either form, feeling, perception, formation, or the consciousness that recognizes it? The analytic approach of the mahayana tradition breaks down everything to these basic factors. Taking the five skandhas as the objects of analysis, you would then look at the nature of form, and so on.

### ***Form***

Is the nature of form permanent or impermanent? It doesn't take much to assume forms to be permanent. Yet there is no form that is not destructible. One "face" of anything that is formed, or originated, is existence and the other face is always extinction, or destruction. With any gathering together of parts there is always dispersion. What *is* there then—from the greatest object to the minutest atomic particle—that is unchanging, permanent, or everlasting?

From the contemplative perspective, you have to adjust your mind to recognize whether form is empty in nature, composite, and impermanent—or not. Is it possible to have form without interdependence and the coming together of many factors? If not, form is impermanent. Then, we easily find that nothing is independent. Everything originates from the interdependence of many things that go into making up any form. Therefore form is changing and form is composite. There is no independent form that is permanent, absolute, and without change.

### ***Feeling***

In the same way, take feeling into meditation. What is feeling? When the *Satipatthana Sutra* talks about the four foundations of mindfulness, it refers to "a butcher sitting in a crossroads." Having slaughtered some animal, let's say, a goat, the butcher sets out all the different parts. "Here's the head. Here's a hind leg. Here are the lungs and other organs. This is the good meat, this is bad meat." At which point, a meditator might ask, "But where is the goat?" Other than the coming together of all its constituent parts, there is no goat.

Now butchers may not be sitting in crossroads these days, but you can still reflect on feelings the same way. When a feeling arises it seems very real. You may assume it exists independently and permanently, but in the next fleeting moment other feelings arise. One after another, they are constantly changing. You can see the impermanent nature of feelings. If you search for an *entity* called feeling, you can't find one. Will you still stubbornly say that feelings exist? You can—and we do, all the time. But knowing the true nature of feelings, you could choose to let your perspective mature.

### ***Perception***

Perceptions work the same way. Let's say you just walked into this teaching situation and instead of a warm welcome, your host says, "Our group is the best. You folks are ignorant, but since you managed to get in, you'll have to become lifetime members here." If your host started off with that kind of momentum, you wouldn't feel very welcome, comfortable, or safe. Would you?

Perceptions are as changeable as that. It just takes one person to change a happy moment to a sad moment, or a sad moment to a good moment. Perceptions are impermanent by nature, and absolutely dependent on causes and conditions to come into being.

### ***Formation***

Formation is dependent upon reflexive, reactive responses. It is never independent, but merely a moving impulse or momentum. Call it an "energy" or a "force," it is not visible, not locatable, transitory by nature, and always dependant on causes and conditions that are constantly changing.

### ***Consciousness***

Then we come to consciousness: the boss. This is the one we assume to be "I," or "me." But like any boss, consciousness doesn't amount to anything on its own. Without form, feeling, perception, and formation, consciousness would be helpless. To perform any activity at all, to even be

recognized, consciousness depends on many factors and is therefore composite. If you try to locate it—well as it says so beautifully in the text, not even the Buddha could locate consciousness. If you would like to prove the Buddha wrong, that contest has been left open for 2500 years.

We call consciousness “mind,” or mind consciousness. It *does* keep the other four skandhas together and form the base upon which they function. But beyond the name, there is no perceivable consciousness to be found. Agreed, it is the basis—but its nature is emptiness.

### **Meditation: Three Instructions**

How can we practice this so that we, too, can understand what was understood by Arya Avalokiteshvara? In the Heart Sutra text, upon the Buddha’s inspiration, this is what Venerable Shariputra asks Arya Avalokiteshvara: How should a son or daughter of noble family engage in the practice of the profound perfection of wisdom? When this has been said, Arya Avalokiteshvara said to Venerable Shariputra:

*Shariputra, any son or daughter who wishes to practice  
the perfection of wisdom should see this way:  
They should see insightfully, correctly, and repeatedly.*

Seeing insightfully, correctly, and repeatedly: these three instructions become the foundation of discipline in meditation. Why do we need to meditate often, with discipline and diligence? An insight glimpsed once can happen, but it is not powerful—certainly not powerful enough to cut through the suppositions and belief in suppositions that we have sustained for lifetimes. Therefore, Arya Avalokiteshvara says that to understand impermanence, interdependence, and emptiness, they should be seen “insightfully, correctly, and repeatedly.”

*Insightfully* simply refers to seeing “as it is.” *Correctly* refers to your meditation being free from personal ambition. And *repeatedly* emphasizes the continuum of that awareness: the sutra aspect, or unbroken chain of conscious awareness of the true nature. Thus, repeatedly see even the five aggregates to be empty of inherent nature.

### **Everything Changes, Nothing Exists by Itself**

Then the Heart Sutra says:

*Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is not  
other than form. Form is also not other than emptiness.*

These four lines refer to the four basic principles of mahayana Buddhism. When you insightfully, correctly, and repeatedly see all things—even the five aggregates—to be impermanent by nature, composite by nature, and empty by nature, you see the *true* nature. This is the insight that arises.

*Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form.*

“Form is emptiness” reflects the fundamental empty nature of all form. At the same time, form is also interdependent. It is interdependence, itself, that allows emptiness to become form.

“Emptiness is form” is the appreciation of interdependent origination. From the coming together of causes and conditions arise—from nothing—all the beautiful forms, feelings, and perceptions that

we experience. It is the beauty of emptiness that allows all forms to arise, not as singular entities or things, but as the coming together of form. Thus, “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.”

*Emptiness is nothing other than form.*

This line expounds the logic of the union of emptiness and dependent origination. The fact that dependent origination arises from emptiness does not mean it displaces the empty nature. Inherently, appearances are not only interdependent, they are also separate—and at the very ultimate level, their separateness reveals their nature to be empty. So the third line, “Emptiness is not other than form,” is really presenting the logic of the union of emptiness and appearance.

*Form is nothing other than emptiness.*

The fourth line is the logic that says form does not contradict emptiness, and emptiness does not contradict form. Neither do they contradict one another, nor are they incompatible with one another. Because of emptiness, appearances are free to manifest as they wish—but those appearances are also inherently empty by nature.

*Everything changes and nothing exists by its self.*

If the previous four lines and principles are understood, they can be simplified to read: Everything changes and nothing exists by itself. These two fundamental principles are the very essence of the four lines: “Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is nothing other than form. Form is nothing other than emptiness.”

### ***Emptiness as Kindness***

Thus far, in answer to Shariputra’s question Avalokiteshvara has said:

*Shariputra, any noble son or daughter who wishes to practice the perfection of wisdom should see it in this way. They should see insightfully, correctly and repeatedly, that even the five aggregates are empty of inherent nature. Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form. Form is also not other than emptiness.*

Now he continues:

*Feeling is emptiness. Emptiness is feeling. Feeling is nothing other than emptiness. Emptiness is nothing other than feeling. Perception is emptiness. Emptiness is perception. Perception is nothing other than emptiness. Emptiness is nothing other than perception. Formation is emptiness. Emptiness is formation. Emptiness is nothing other than formation. Formation is nothing other than emptiness. Likewise, consciousness is emptiness. Emptiness is consciousness. Consciousness is nothing other than emptiness. Emptiness is nothing other than consciousness.*

In short, as the great Mahamudra and Dzogchen masters have said: Stop meddling, stop interfering. Stop being so opinionated that you feel the world can’t exist without your judgments and opinions. Be particularly guarded about imposing on others opinions and judgments that are contaminated by not seeing things as they truly are, or judging things by what you wish to see.

In other words, don't be so unkind.

You are responsible for your wonderful mind, which could see more thoroughly if you would only take the time. Now, how do you give yourself more time—especially in a culture where speed is equated with cleverness, capability, and worthiness? There is only one way! Let yourself sit down. Let yourself become quiet. Let yourself be free of thoughts. Then you will gradually understand that the world is better off for your stillness and silence—free from your modifications, elaborations, and particularly your expectations.

That insight comes from seeing that the expectations you hold onto are based on a linear way of thinking. You stubbornly expect things that are, by nature, constantly changing not to change. Instead of allowing things to be “as they are,” you stubbornly demand them to be as you expect them to be. When your expectations aren't met, you become angry. When they *are* met, you are angrier still because they may somehow get away from you—and you don't want that!

Then you become thoroughly confused. Maybe *insisting* on your expectations will somehow bring about happiness. But the more aggressive you become, the more that ignorance and confusion turn against you—and they *do* turn against you. Nevertheless, you keep scratching that bloody sore, and then blame others when you bleed. This is the kind of lifestyle we lead.

Take time to really look at the basis of your expectations. What is the nature of those things you expect? What is the nature of the expecting mind? Things that are transitory by nature should be free of your demands for permanence. When composite things made up of so many factors are freed from your partial, linear outlook, this is bodhichitta. This is compassion. This is kindness.

Seeing emptiness makes you the kindest person: one who allows others to be as they are without suppositions, demands, and expectations. Non-interference, non-elaboration, and a gentle acceptance of things as they are—this is the perfection of absolute bodhichitta: the realization of the empty, impermanent nature of self and all phenomena. In the mahayana, the realization of emptiness and absolute bodhichitta are the same. When that realization arises, the Sutra says:

*Sensation, discrimination, conditioning, and awareness are also empty.  
In this way, Shariputra, all things are emptiness. They are without defining  
characteristics. They are born, and they are not born, and they do not cease.  
They are not defiled. They are not undefiled. They have no increase.  
They have no decrease.*

Then you will see the extent to which your sense perceptions and discriminations are a play of your mind. It's like this, not like that; it must be this way, not that way; it should be here, not there—you are constantly projecting this load of expectations and demands. But how much of what you're demanding is *really* there? And how much is just the product of a creatively busy mind with ceaseless assumptions and opinions, unable to see the true nature of things as they are? Here Arya Avalokiteshvara says to Shariputra:

*Shariputra, in emptiness there is no form, no sensation,  
no discrimination, no conditioning, and no awareness.*

The emptiness of these five affirms the emptiness nature of the five skandhas in the previous lines. Seeing the five skandhas to be by nature truly impermanent, composite, dependent in origination,

and inherently free of being separate entities—this is the realization of the emptiness nature of the five skandhas.

### **The Emptiness Nature of the Eighteen Dhatus and Twelve Nidanas**

The next lines affirm the empty nature of the six sense faculties and sense objects:

*There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind.  
There is no form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no texture, no phenomena.*

Just as the five skandhas are realized to be empty by nature, here there is no eye, ear, and so on, up to no element of mental awareness, or mind. Furthermore, there is no form, sound, smell, taste, texture, or phenomena. In the prajnaparamita meditation, seeing the empty nature of the six sense faculties and their objects, one also sees the empty nature of the sense consciousnesses. Taken together these form the eighteen *dhatas*.

Analyzing in the same way, ignorance itself is seen to be inherently empty. There is no ignorance and no elimination of ignorance—up to no aging and death, and no elimination of aging and death. Investigating further, one sees that even the twelve dependent originations, or *nidanas*, are ultimately empty by nature. This affirms the emptiness nature of the twelve interdependent links.

### **The Emptiness Nature of Buddhahood and the Four Noble Truths**

*There is no suffering, no origin of suffering, no cessation, and no path.  
There is no wisdom, no attainment, and even no non-attainment.*

In the first sentence, “no suffering, origin, cessation, or path” affirms the ultimate emptiness nature of even the Four Noble Truths. In the second sentence, “no wisdom, no attainment, and no non-attainment,” is the recognition that in the ultimate essence, there is no such thing as samsara and nirvana. There is not even buddhahood to obtain. This is how a Buddhist meditator should meditate.

“Without ambition” is a very general way to understand our deep habit of maintaining agendas. Some agendas are as vast as wanting to attain buddhahood, long life, prosperity, and wealth. Some are as simple as wanting good feelings and sensations and a happy, sane life. And some agendas can be as subtle as imagining enlightenment to be a perceptible, conceptual state of achievement.

When that fabrication comes into your meditation, you have managed to “copyright” absolute truth with your ego-cherishing mind, which will sooner or later change that absolute truth into *your* absolute truth, which will be of no benefit at all. Then whatever you do is mere entertainment—some of it good, some partially good, but always very relative and never absolute. Therefore, Shariputra says:

*The bodhisattvas have no attainment. They abide relying on the perfection of wisdom. Having no defilements in their minds, they have no fear; and passing completely beyond error, they reach nirvana. Likewise all the Buddhas abiding in the three times, clearly and completely awakened to unexcelled, authentic, complete awakening, in dependence upon the perfection of wisdom.*



This verse emphasizes the importance of undiluted, unfabricated abiding. It makes sure that whatever you are meditating upon does not become, in the words of the great master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a “cozy cocoon.” Instead of escaping into a comfortable nest that you build around yourself, you should be *absolutely* free from any hidden ego agendas. Your mind should just rest in the naturalness of things as they truly are—thus freeing others from your interference and fabrication.

Within a mind that has no agenda and no ego-cherishing ambition, there is no fear. Therefore it is called an indestructible “vajra mind.” To say that you are a vajrayana practitioner is to recognize this ability and the various methods that bring it about. But, again, these methods are like many rivulets that run into one ocean: the ocean of insight that frees from all elaboration of ego-cherishing tendencies. This is called “complete awakening dependent on the perfection of wisdom.” Therefore one should know the mantra of the perfection of wisdom.

### Going Beyond: The Prajnaparamita Mantra

*The mantra of great knowledge, the precious mantra, the unexcelled mantra, the mantra equal to unequalled, the mantra that quells all suffering, is true because it is not deceptive. The mantra of the perfection of wisdom is proclaimed and that mantra is known as the Heart Sutra mantra, the prajnaparamita mantra:*

TADYATHA GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA.

TADYATHA simply means “it is this,” it is simply as it is. GATE means “to go”; GATE, GATE is “go, go.” PARAGATE means “to go beyond.” To go beyond what? To go beyond one’s expectations; beyond one’s habitual tendencies of elaboration; beyond a linear perspective; beyond agendas and ambitions, even spiritual, nirvanic ambitions. PARASAMGATE is “to go utterly beyond” to BODHI SVAHA, or simply “perfection as it is.”

When you say this mantra, TADYATHA GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA, what you are telling yourself as a meditator is to just go and rest in the “nature as it is,” beyond the elaborations of the insecure tendencies and habits of a mind contaminated by its own fabrications.

Reciting this mantra is said to be extremely powerful. It is called the mantra of great knowledge, because reflection on this mantra severs the grasping and passion through which your ambition works. When that ambition dissolves, aggression dissolves and confusion dissolves. Because the mantra has the ability to free one from passion, aggression, and ignorance, it is called the mantra of great knowledge.

It is called the unexcelled mantra because there is no greater mantra, this being the mantra that takes you directly into resting without an agenda, in the most honest and natural sphere you could be—to the point, I would say, of inspiring you to not get lost in being a Buddhist. Rather, understand what true Buddhism is, and do not mistakenly think that being a Buddhist means understanding what Buddhism is teaching you.

It is the precious mantra because it protects the mind. Its constant recitation keeps the mind on track, free from the seductions of one’s habitual neuroses.

It is the mantra equal to the unequalled, where unequalled means “enlightenment,” or absolute freedom from all elaboration. Therefore it is equal to the state of enlightenment, or nirvana.

It is the mantra that quells all suffering. If you are not creating trouble, there is no suffering. Therefore the mantra inspires you to bring about cessation of the habitual patterns bred from passion, aggression, and ignorance—whose only reason for *being* is founded on suppositions and assumptions that lack the courage or honesty to look at things as they truly are.

And, because the mantra that quells all suffering is not deceptive, it is true. The mantra of the perfection of wisdom should be read in this way:

TADYATHA GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA.

Arya Avalokiteshvara said to Shariputra, “Shariputra, a bodhisattva, a great being, should train in the profound perfection of wisdom in this way.” Then the Blessed One arose from his meditative concentration and commended Arya Avalokiteshvara, the great being, the bodhisattva, saying:

*Excellent, excellent, noble child. It is just so, noble child. It is just so.  
One should practice the profound perfection of wisdom in the manner that  
you have just revealed. The Tathagathas rejoice.*

It is only here that the Buddha is featured in the Heart Sutra. And he is simply saying that it is “just so.” This is absolutely correct; this is how it should be practiced. Then the bodhisattva Shariputra and Arya Avalokiteshvara and that entire assembly along with the worlds of gods, humans, asuras, and gandharvas all rejoiced and praised highly what the Blessed One had said.

### **You Have the Potential...**

At the end of the Heart Sutra, I remember my teacher would always say:

*What is seen is seen, never pursued. What is heard is heard, never pursued.  
What is smelled is smelled, but never pursued. What is tasted is tasted,  
but never pursued. What is thought is thought, but never pursued.*

Understanding that—if you were to give your senses these five simple freedoms—you would have pretty much realized a much simpler version of the Heart Sutra.

I will leave it at that. I don’t know about you, but I feel we have raced quickly through something very profound. It is never a good idea to go through a profound text hurriedly; nevertheless, reading through the sutra is always good.

I will end by urging you to understand how profoundly fortunate you are to be born a human being, with so much goodness and potential. Even if you are not able to do extraordinary things in this life—attaining enlightenment, liberating all sentient beings, and so on—what you *can* do is to live a sane life. This is accessible to you. It is something you deserve, and those related to you deserve it even more. This potential is inherent within you, so you are never far from this reminder.

The whole point of the dharma is to hone and strengthen the potential you have as a human being. You have the potential to have a good life and to make that good life the basis of goodness for

others. If you accidentally bump into something called enlightenment in the bargain, that's also good. Keep this in mind.



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