

## Dharma talk 5/15/2022 Opening the Heart (Sutra)

Good morning, friends.

How are you today? I hope you are well. And I hope that, if you are not well, you can bear it with equanimity. I myself am enjoying the seasonal weather we are having up here in Bellingham. Right now it sometimes feels like all four seasons can happen in a single day, cold, wet, windy, sunny... from wide open sky to clouds so low that I feel I can almost touch them. Today it is on the rainy side and I am glad that you have decided to join us for Zen Alive.

Last week's dharma talk has received many kudos, so – a big thank you to John Craycraft. And Thursday's talk by John Wiley was excellent, he spoke about Pema Chodron's book "how to meditate." And the intention for our last day sit was "renewing retreat" and I hope we will continue in the same vein on May 28, when our next one-day sit takes place. All these events and talks feel like back to basics, fresh and new, encouraging me to revisit old friends. The oldest of these friends is what we chanted this morning, the Heart Sutra. I still remember hearing and chanting it for the first time, upstairs in the old Freemason building. And I remember thinking "What the heck did I just say?"

So, today's dharma talk is titled "Opening the Heart." More accurate might be "About the Opening of the Heart Sutra" but Opening the Heart or Opening the Heart Sutra is more poignant. We all chanted these lines together today so I hope that a few different commentaries and the conversation after the talk might provide welcome food for thought. Trust me, the heart sutra has a purpose. It represents a super compressed list of Buddhist teachings and a contemplation manual. It is not just something to be read or recited, but the intention is to make it personal, to make it yours, to meditate on its meaning in as detailed a way as possible. It gives us the heart essence, the "perfection of wisdom or insight." It does not give us all the details, in fact it does not give us any details. It makes us work for it.

To groove on the heart sutra is difficult, so much is only pointed at. For example, the complete teaching of the four noble truths and the eightfold path is in these words: no suffering, no cause, no cessation, no path ... Wait! Not only is the fundamental teaching of Buddhism expressed in 8 words, it is also denied in the heart sutra? No no no no. Good point and food for another talk. I am only using this as an example to demonstrate the compression.

Onward with today's subject. I especially want to bring up the boring parts. Why? Because unraveling the boring part usually reveals the nuts and bolts, the basics we often skip. Mostly we skip it because we know that we already know all about it. Ha! NOT knowing is most intimate. After this introduction and I know you are all very excited. So, here is the opening of the heart sutra which we chanted this morning during service:

*Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, when deeply practicing prajña paramita, clearly saw that all five aggregates are empty and thus relieved all suffering. Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself form. Sensations, perceptions, formations, and consciousness are also like this. Shariputra, all dharmas are marked by emptiness; they neither arise nor cease, are neither defiled nor pure, neither increase nor decrease.*

First, let us take a close look at individual words and phrases. Please bear with me if you have heard this before.

1. Avalokiteshvara is the bodhisattva of compassion. Avalokiteshvara is compassion personified, in a different religion we might call him the patron saint of compassion. One side note: Kwanyin is Avalokiteshvara in female form in China, and Kannon or Kanzeon in Japan.
2. Prajna Paramita. Prajna means wisdom or enlightenment, paramita is perfection. So we could also say “perfection of direct insight into the truth taught by the Buddha, as a faculty required to attain enlightenment.”
3. The five aggregates in Buddhism are form, sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness. When I originally learned the heart sutra, we used the word skandhas instead of aggregates. And after we are done with the general overview, we are going to come back and investigate the skandhas, the aggregates in depth.
4. Empty. We ask “Empty of what?” and we answer, “Empty of a separate, independent self, empty of weightiness, empty of burden, empty of boundary.”
5. Suffering is a limited translation for the term duḥkha. It is important as one of the three marks of existence. Anatman (not-self) and anitya ("impermanence") are the other two.

Birth is duḥkha, aging is duḥkha, illness is duḥkha, death is duḥkha;  
Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are duḥkha;  
Association with the unbeloved is duḥkha; separation from the loved is duḥkha;  
Not getting what is wanted is duḥkha.

In conclusion, the five clinging-aggregates are duḥkha.

6. Shariputra was one of the main disciples of the Buddha. In Mahayana scriptures he is the fall guy who does not get it, thereby demonstrating the superiority of mahayana. This is very unkind and historically inaccurate but there you go.

7. Dharma with a capital D means teaching or law, here we have dharma with a small d, meaning phenomena or things. In the Abhidharma the word dharma is also described as “smallest, briefest unit of experience.”

I thought it would be fun to have a heart sutra with all the common terms inserted but alas, in doing that I lost its heart and poetry.

*Avalokiteshvara, the avatar of compassion, when deeply immersed in the practice of the perfection of wisdom, clearly saw that the five pillars that make us human have no independent self-existence. They inter-are, depend, and rely on the rest of the universe, space, and time. Thus Avalokiteshvara relieved all dis-ease and unsatisfactoriness.*

*He said “Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness of a separate, independent self, empty of weightiness, empty of burden, empty of boundary, emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself form. Sensations do not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from sensations. Perceptions do not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from perceptions. Formations do not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from formations. Consciousness does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from consciousness. Shariputra, all forms and experiences are marked by being empty of a separate, independent self; they neither arise nor cease, are neither defiled nor pure, neither increase nor decrease.*

P 8 the heart of understanding

p 57 red pine

tana 153

Tsai Chih Chung Heart Sutra book

p21 An Arrow to the Heart and 38, 39

We have taken a look at different scholars and practitioners and we have heard how different their commentaries, their visions are. And yet, they all point at the same heart. You may recall that a lifetime or twenty minutes ago I said that the intention is to make the heart sutra personal. So I am ending this talk with a question: How will we unfold the heart of the heart sutra?

