The Heart of Perfect Wisdom—
Lecture on The Heart of Prajñā Pāramitā Sutra
(part 1)

The Heart of Prajñā Pāramitā Sutra, better known simply as the Heart Sutra, is one of the most important scriptures in Buddhism. It is memorized and chanted by millions of Buddhists around the world everyday. The Heart Sutra is the distillation of prajñā pāramitā, the most sublime and profound wisdom that can bring one to ultimate enlightenment.
般若波羅蜜多心經

觀自在菩薩。行深般若波羅蜜多時。照見五蘊皆空。度一切苦厄。舍利子。色不異空。空不異色。色即是空。空即是色。受想行識亦復如是。舍利子。是諸法空相。不生不滅。不垢不淨。不增不減。是故空。無色。無受想行識。無眼耳鼻舌身意。無色聲香味觸法。無眼界。乃至無意識界。無無明。亦無無明盡。乃至無老死。亦無老死盡。無苦集滅道。無智亦無得。以無所得故。菩提薩埵。依般若波羅蜜多故。心無罣礙。無罣礙故。無怖。遠離顛倒夢想。究竟涅槃。世諸佛。依般若波羅蜜多故。得阿耨多羅藐藐菩提。故知般若波羅蜜多。是大神咒。是大明咒。是無等咒。是無等等咒。能除一切苦。真實不虛故。說般若波羅蜜多咒。即說咒曰。

揭帝揭帝 波羅揭帝 波羅僧揭帝 菩提薩婆诃

The Heart of Prajñā Pāramitā Sutra

Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, while deeply immersed in prajñā pāramitā, clearly perceived the empty nature of the five skandhas, and transcended all suffering.

Śāriputra! Form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form. Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. So it is with feeling, conception, volition, and consciousness.

Śāriputra! All dharmas are empty in character; neither arising nor ceasing, neither impure nor pure, neither increasing nor decreasing.

Therefore, in emptiness, there is no form; there is no feeling, conception, volition, or consciousness; no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or dharmas; no realm of vision, and so forth, up to no realm of mind-consciousness; no ignorance or ending of ignorance, and so forth, up to no aging and death or ending of aging and death. There is no suffering, no cause, no extinction, no path. There is no wisdom and no attainment. There is nothing to be attained.

By way of prajñā pāramitā, the bodhisattva’s mind is free from hindrances. With no hindrances, there is no fear; freed from all distortion and delusion, ultimate nirvana is reached.

By way of prajñā pāramitā, Buddhas of the past, present, and future attain anuttara-samyak-sambodhi.

Therefore, prajñā pāramitā is the great powerful mantra, the great enlightening mantra, the supreme and peerless mantra. It can remove all suffering. This is the truth beyond all doubt. And the prajñā pāramitā mantra is spoken thus:

Gate gate pāragate pārasamgate bodhi svāhā.
Why are we interested in the Heart Sutra? In everything that we do, we should understand what we’re doing and why. The Heart Sutra teaches us wisdom, prajñā wisdom. There are many kinds of wisdom. Some people confuse wisdom with intelligence, wit or knowledge. In this day and age, we are all inundated with knowledge. Ever since we started school and throughout our many years of education, we were fed with a great deal of information, and it seems that the things that we need to know increase everyday and we can never catch up with them.

Knowledge is not the same as wisdom. Someone who is very knowledgeable isn’t necessarily wise. Wisdom is knowing how to behave, how to understand life, how to cope with people, how to learn from experiences. It is knowing how to see mistakes before they occur, how to correct mistakes, how to be more mature, and how to progress spiritually. Also, there is worldly wisdom, which we are more familiar with. You may go to someone wise, to your teacher or to your parents about problems in life. Or you may go to a philosopher, psychologist, or scientist and try to find the answer to some difficult questions about life.

Prajñā wisdom, the subject of the Heart Sutra, goes beyond worldly wisdom. It teaches us how to see and understand the true self. It teaches us how to see reality, how to end the cycle of rebirth and gain liberation. This is not in the realm of worldly knowledge or worldly wisdom. So prajñā wisdom is something very special, very profound and difficult to understand. That is why we need to be patient. This subject can be confusing but at least by the end of this lecture, I hope to plant a Buddha seed in you, a seed of enlightenment.

Buddha and Buddhist Sutra

What is a Sutra? Sutra is a Sanskrit word. Sanskrit is the classic language of India. Sutra is a scripture. It means the Buddha’s teachings. The Buddha was an Indian prince, his name was Siddhartha and he lived about 2500 or 3000 years ago. When he saw the suffering of the people and of all sentient beings, he decided to leave the palace to seek the truth, to seek the medicine that can cure all suffering. After many years of diligent efforts he attained enlightenment and perfection and he became known as the Buddha. Buddha means the enlightened one, the
awakened one. He is someone who has no confusion, someone who understands the whole of reality and someone who can show the way to true happiness. His answers and teachings are known as sutras. The sutras were spoken by the Buddha, memorized and passed down from generation to generation by his disciples, and later written down. The Buddha preached for almost 50 years and left many teachings with us.

**Prajña Pāramitā**

Pāramitā means arriving at the other shore. The Buddha often makes the analogy that we are on this side of the ocean and nirvana is the other side of the ocean. We need to sail across to the other shore. Pāramitā means the path, a practice, a way for us to get to the other shore, to get to some goal. And the goal here is nothing less than nirvana, nothing less than Buddhahood. This is a state of no delusion, a state of total clarity which is perfect enlightenment. That is the other shore. And how do we get there? We need prajñā wisdom. Prajñā is sometimes translated as transcendental wisdom. It can help you transcend your mundane existence. It can enable you to become a sage, a bodhisattva, or a Buddha.

**Bodhisattva**

Bodhisattva is also a Sanskrit word. The Sanskrit language is like German in that it puts two words together by combining them. Bodhisattva is composed of two words, bodhi and sattva. Those of you who are Chinese will know that this is “Pu-ti-sa-duo.” (菩提薩埵，菩薩). Bodhi means enlightenment or awakening or an awakened state. Sattva means sentient beings, mundane, ordinary beings. So a bodhisattva is a sentient being who is on the path to enlightenment. This is someone who has made a vow to become a Buddha, to achieve perfect enlightenment, but who is not yet a Buddha. A bodhisattva also makes a resolve to liberate all sentient beings, to liberate not just family and friends but also enemies, people of other countries, animals, and all sentient beings. When someone can make such a great vow, a vow to reach nothing less than perfection, a vow to reach and enlighten countless sentient beings no matter how long it takes, then this person is on the bodhisattva path. It is the Buddhist ideal. If you can make the bodhisattva vow now, then you are a bodhisattva. However, you’ll only be a baby bodhisattva, a young bodhisattva who has just been born. We hope that all Buddhists and all sentient beings can make the bodhisattva vow and embark on the path to becoming a Buddha.

**Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara**

Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (觀自在菩薩) is one of the most famous of the bodhisattvas. But Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara is not a baby bodhisattva; he is someone who has practiced the bodhisattva way lifetime after lifetime, for many eons. He is very powerful, very wise, and very enlightened.

Avalokit means to perceive, to contemplate or to observe. Svāra means sound. Avalokiteśvara means to perceive through hearing; hearing the cries of the people. But this word can also be interpreted in a different way. It can be a combination of Avalokit and Isvara. Isvara means a master of oneself, someone who is totally in charge or in control (自在). These are the
two interpretations for this name. Avalokiteśvara is someone who can hear the cries of sentient beings, the cries of suffering, the cries of pain, and that is the vow of this bodhisattva. In times of need and in emergencies, whenever someone cries out the name of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva will come to the rescue; he will manifest in front of you whether you see him or not and he will save you from peril and from harm. This is the power of this bodhisattva. Whether you believe it or not, this has happened many times in history, in India’s Buddhist history, in China’s Buddhist history, and in Japan’s Buddhist history. This is the most popular bodhisattva in Chinese Buddhism. Countless people who have cried out the name of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in times of danger were miraculously saved. This shows the power of this bodhisattva.

The Nature of Hearing

The other meaning of the name Avalokiteśvara is to contemplate or to perceive the self nature. This tells us how this bodhisattva has practiced in order to become as wise, enlightened, and powerful as he is: to contemplate on the true self, to perceive the true nature. In the Surangama Sutra, it explains how this bodhisattva practices to reach enlightenment. The method begins with hearing, with the correct understanding of the nature of hearing. Now pay attention. Listen carefully.

As I am speaking now, can you hear me? Can you hear the words? Everyone can, unless you fell asleep already. Now ...(silence followed ...) did you hear something just then? You didn’t hear anything? No, it’s not that you didn’t hear, it’s that you heard that there was no sound. There’s a subtle difference there. You heard that I was not speaking. You perceived that there was no sound. Still you perceived. Buddha teaches us that everything is impermanent. Sound is impermanent, form is impermanent, your body is impermanent. But there is something that is not impermanent, something that never fades. Everything that arises will cease but there is something that neither arises nor ceases. It is something that neither comes nor goes away. You can’t see it or touch it but it is very real. What is this?

It is your hearing. The sound comes and goes, so it is impermanent. When I speak, you will hear words and when I don’t speak, you don’t hear any words. No, it’s not that you don’t hear them, it’s that you heard that there is no sound. You hear, the hearing is always there, isn’t it? Your perception, it is always there. Is there a time when the hearing is not there? When you sleep, is the hearing there? What do you hear when you go to sleep? Snoring! (laugh) What else do you hear when you are sleeping? When you dream of hearing voices these may not be real voices. They are often made up by your mind. But they could also be outside voices. Have you ever dreamt of hearing music and when you wake up there is actually music playing? Yes, it can happen. What else? How about an alarm clock? How did you get up this morning? “I have to come to the Buddhist service, I must get up at nine o’clock!” So the alarm clock woke you up. How is it that you could hear the alarm clock while you were sleeping? It is because the hearing is always there. You might not have known this before but your hearing is always there.

You need to recognize this for yourself. It is not a theory. I’m talking about reality. Buddhism is a teaching about reality, about recognizing reality. For example, nirvana is something you can actually experience, not a theoretical utopia. Can you see for yourself that the
hearing doesn’t come and go? It doesn’t arise and it doesn’t cease. It doesn’t arise when the sound comes and it doesn’t cease when the sound goes away. If the hearing goes away, then you won’t be able to hear anything. It doesn’t go away. This is a fact. Either you see it now or you will see it some day.

So everything you observe, everything you see, is impermanent. But this hearing doesn’t seem to be impermanent. Now, what about death? When you die does it go away? Do you think it goes away? If you think so, raise your hand. (Only one!) Why do you think it goes away? You’re speculating, aren’t you? You have to be, because you are not dead yet. You believe that in death there is nothing left. But that is a speculation. It is not a true experience. Hearing is a true experience. So let’s not leave anything to speculation. Buddha rejected all speculations. In your experience, hearing doesn’t go away.

But what is it that hears? Is it your ear that hears? Or is it your mind that hears? Can a deaf person hear? Yes or no? (Someone said yes.) What does a deaf person hear? Now don’t go out and exclaim that a deaf person hears, that’s a miracle (laugh)! But a deaf person does hear. He may not be able to hear sounds and music but he does hear. He probably hears humming, or he probably hears the sound of silence. But he does hear. It’s like when you are in a silent room, you hear silence. So a deaf person hears. It’s not about your ear or how good your ear is. Your ear is impermanent and how well you hear is impermanent. Notice the difference! How well you hear, the instrument of your hearing (the ear) is impermanent. When you grow old, your hearing may fade but that just means that less sound is transmitted by your ears. Sometimes more or less sound reaches your ears, sometimes more or less sound is transmitted by your ears, but your hearing, the awareness, the perception of either sound or no sound, is eternal. It never goes away. That is the part of the true self, neither arising nor ceasing.

So the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara recognized this. That in hearing there is something eternal. So the bodhisattva’s mind abides in that. It cannot cling to anything impermanent because that will fade away, but by focusing on this hearing that never goes away, the bodhisattva’s mind becomes calm. As he focuses on this stable, eternal, inner awareness, his mind becomes crystal clear; all the noises, clutter, and delusions fade away and the bodhisattva reaches enlightenment. That is the way Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara practiced.

But it is not just hearing. Seeing is just the same way. Is it your eyes that see? Can a blind person see? When you leave this lecture hall you will say a blind person can see (laugh). Another miracle! Yes, a blind person can see. He sees darkness. No different than if you were in a dark room. So colors, light, and sounds come and go. But the hearing and the seeing never go away. In fact, what sees and what hears are the same. It is just the mind, a single mind.

Transcending All Suffering

Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, while deeply immersed in prajñā paramitā, clearly perceived the empty nature of the five skandhas, and transcended all suffering.

This is the purpose of studying the Heart Sutra – to transcend all suffering. Is there suffering in the world? That is the first of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths. In our Zen Buddhism class we
talked about the eight different kinds of suffering. They are: 1) birth, 2) aging, 3) sickness, 4) death, 5) desires, seeking for things that you cannot get, 6) separation from loved ones, 7) being with people you dislike, 8) irritation: mental irritation, discomfort, anxiety, and pressure. All people suffer from these. Whether you are the president, a beggar on the street, or Bill Gates, you all have these sufferings.

To transcend all suffering – it is not easy. That’s why we need to understand the emptiness of the five skandhas. “While deeply immersed in prajñā pāramitā”; “immersed” is being in profound meditation, meditating on the prajñā wisdom. By practicing the prajñā pāramitā—the path to the perfection of transcendental wisdom, the bodhisattva is able to delve deeply into the understanding of prajñā pāramitā. Immerse means that your whole body and mind is steeped in this understanding. It is not just superficial understanding, it is not obtained by studying from a book, or by hearing a talk; it is achieved by practice. Some of you may now understand the nature of hearing, that hearing neither comes nor goes, that it is eternal. For someone who still doesn’t understand, then it is a teaching, a theory, some food for though. For those who can understand it, the hearing is very real, it is absolutely you and nobody else. When we can see it very clearly, it is not just knowledge, it becomes reality. Deeply immersed in prajñā pāramitā means that you have a deep profound understanding and you experience the truth of the Buddha’s teaching. You see that phenomena are ultimately empty in nature. They neither come nor go, they neither increase nor decrease, they neither arise nor cease. When you come to this understanding, you can transcend suffering. This is possible by perceiving the empty nature of the five skandhas (aggregates). The five skandhas, in short, are your body and mind. Next we’ll explain the five skandhas.