

Maria Reis Habito
Embodying Compassion
Week Three: “The Power of Emptiness”
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I'm Maria Reis Habito, a meditation teacher here at the Maria Kannon Zen Center in Dallas. Today, I want to speak about the power of the insight into emptiness that's called *prajnaparamita*—the wisdom of emptiness. This is part three of my series of talks on the bodhisattva of great compassion, also known as the bodhisattva Kuan Yin, as guidance and inspiration for our Zen practice.

I want to look directly at the *Heart Sutra* text. This is the most famous text in the Zen tradition, which is something that is recited during our regular sittings and especially during retreats. The bodhisattva Kuan Yin—that is a Chinese name as I explained before—is the one who perceives the sounds of the world. Most of the texts in the *Heart Sutra* are translated from the Sanskrit into Chinese. The Sanskrit name of Kuan Yin is *Avalokiteshvara*. The text begins with Avalokiteshvara practicing deep *prajnaparamita*. Like I said, Avalokiteshvara is bodhisattva Kuan Yin. But in this text, interestingly, the name is translated differently into Chinese. It's translated as a term which means the one whose gaze is completely free or is completely unimpeded. So, the bodhisattva with free gaze was practicing deep *Prajnaparamita*.

The text goes on to say that this bodhisattva perceived the emptiness of all five conditions and was freed from pain. Again, bodhisattva Kuan Yin is the bodhisattva in the *Lotus Sutra* who has made a vow to save all suffering beings. In the *Surangama* or the *Heroic March Sutra*, it is explained how this bodhisattva reached enlightenment simply by listening to the sounds of the waves until the sound receded into silence. In this text, Kuan Yin is speaking about the content of her enlightenment as she perceived the emptiness of all five conditions and was freed of pain.

What does it mean to practice *prajnaparamita*, to practice this deep wisdom of emptiness? When we are concentrating on our breath, when we are mindful of our breath, we are practicing the highest wisdom of *prajnaparamita*. If we are able to concentrate our usually distracted mind on just breathing in and out, the distractions become fewer, and the concentration becomes stronger.



If we can fix our awareness on the breath and practice like that, with time our practice develops into a dimension that is quite luminous. The concentration on the breath—this is the practice of prajnaparamita.

If we take up the practice of listening to silence and we can let go of our thoughts of the destructive mind, we will be filled with the energy of concentration. We may be surprised about that, but really, the state of concentration is the original state of our being. Our original state of heart and mind is not being dispersed. This is why we often feel so joyful and so at peace when we can be turned to this original state of being fully concentrated on something.

This is an experience that every one of us has had—if we are concentrated on something and have worked to the point that we forget ourselves, we have reached a state of energy and focus. But after, if we let that go, we don't feel as happy, content, or energized. Focusing on our breath, listening to silence, or the Zen practice of a concentrating on a koan, are all expressions of prajnaparamita. Through practicing prajnaparamita, Kuan Yin perceived the emptiness of all five conditions and was freed of pain.

The five conditions, or the five *skandhas*, are the building blocks of what we perceive to be a human being. It's the bodily form, sensations, the thoughts that follow the sensations, the reaction, and consciousness. We usually mistake those five building blocks for 'I, me, and mine.' We attach something individual to them. But as Avalokiteshvara realized, there is no such self existing. There is no individual element in any of these elements. They are constantly changing. They are impermanent.

If, for example, someone cut you off in traffic, then all of a sudden you get upset. The reaction to that is, “Why did they have to do that?” The impulse that follows is to go after this person, cut the person off, or say something mean. Our consciousness can get completely consumed with



that feeling. The self that wants to go after somebody else—is that your true self? Kuan Yin deeply saw through those five conditioned elements, realized there is no self, and was freed of pain.

The text says that all five building blocks are empty. We hear this word emptiness a lot. In the Chinese translation, emptiness—or *ku* in Japanese—is part of the character that is also used for the sky. Emptiness is not negative like a dark hole, it's just not there. It is the luminous, unbound, unlimited dimension that is the quality of the sky. It's just as luminous as the sky, enlightening everything in this universe.

If we understand this quality that is underlying everything that exists, then we adopt a happier approach to life. Our gaze becomes as free as the gaze of this bodhisattva. Seeing that there is no solid self in any of these elements, Kuan Yin became free to reach out and help others because there was no longer a blockage between the self that is here, and another self out there. Instead, the pain of other beings become the pain of Kuan Yin. That is why all of Kuan Yin's reactions were so spontaneous and natural in trying to allay that pain.

To go back to the five building blocks, the *Heart Sutra* continues to say that this bodily form is no other than emptiness and emptiness is no other than form. In other words, form is precisely emptiness, and emptiness is precisely form. Sensations, thoughts, impulse, and consciousness are also like that. They, too, are nothing but this emptiness, this unbound dimension that is underlying all of our existence. The *Heart Sutra* says that *all* things are manifestations of emptiness. They are not born and not destroyed. They are not stained and not pure. There is no gain and there is no loss.

This speaks about the quality of the true self—this unbound, empty horizon of our existence. This quality is not born and it is not destroyed, meaning it is infinite. It doesn't have a beginning



and it doesn't have an end. There is nothing there to gain or to lose. To get a better grasp on this, perhaps we were raised from a Judeo-Christian or Muslim background. We usually attribute those same qualities to what we imagine the divine to be. This divine being is not born and not destroyed. There is no gain and there is no loss. We imagine the divine as pure, and there are no categories that we usually use to describe something—they do not apply to the absolute. In Zen we say this absolute is a reality that is beyond all our words and concepts, therefore we can only experience it. This quality of boundless reality is beyond everything that we could imagine.

The text continues to say that in this emptiness—in this boundless horizon—there is no form. Because there is no physical form, it is not something material. There is no sensation or thought impulse, no consciousness, no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind. There is also no color, smell, sound, or touch. In other words, we can open up to that dimension of our being, but it's not something that can ever be apprehended by our usual senses—seeing, smelling, tasting—but by something that is beyond all of that.

However, the boundless horizon is not completely separate from these aspects of form either. The text continues to say that all things are manifestations of emptiness; and emptiness is precisely form. This is something that is perhaps a little bit more difficult to understand, but Zen is always telling us that reality is *one*. There is not a boundless horizon out there and the world of form here. Kuan Yin Avalokiteshvara tells us they are one in the same.

The difference is that, with our usual mind, we often see only the world of form. This creates obstacles for us because we do not realize the boundless dimension that is fully encapsulated in each form that we encounter, see, feel, and smell.

This is not denying this way of being, but is saying that we cannot fully capture our true self if we try to use it as an object, like the objects that we interact with through our senses. In the



Diamond Sutra, the Buddha says that “If you see my true form, then you cannot see me.” How do we come to this point? By practicing prajnaparamita—breathing in and breathing out. By listening to silence. This will allow us to open up to the dimension that is beyond all of our divisive thoughts.

When I go to retreat in Taiwan, there is a straw that I have that hangs in front of my room, and I like it very much because it reminds me of *Tathagata*, or the Buddha. The Buddha retreated from the world, and then came back to the world. This is our practice as well—we take time off to practice. We retire from active thinking. We try to still our mind. We try to open up to our true self, to that boundless reality—but then we have to come back to the world. That movement of coming back to the world is the power of the vow.

After being enlightened, the Buddha himself experienced this boundless dimension that we call emptiness. He was in such amazement that he didn’t want to get up from his seat. As the story goes, the God Rama had to ask him to get up from his seat and teach others what he had realized in his own practice. It was then that the Buddha came back to teach others. The Buddha tried to show that realized, boundless dimension with disciples.

My master Hsin Tao spoke about the relationship between the world of form and the world of emptiness, telling us how form is precisely emptiness and emptiness is precisely form. He says that it is just like a fraction. The denominator is zero—emptiness. The numerator is everything you see—a flower, a boy, an ant, a dog, or whatever you see in the material world. You can imagine those things in the numerator and the infinite in the denominator. That is precisely emptiness.

The Buddha did not use that explanation, but instead taught a koan on lifting up a flower, described in *The Blue Cliff Record*. The assembly was waiting for the Buddha to give a talk on



his enlightenment experience. The Buddha reached down, picked up a flower, twirled it a bit, and showed it to them. Mahakashyapa, a senior student of the Buddha, looked at the flower and broke into a smile. The Buddha said, “I have the treasure of the true eye of the dharma, the marvelous mind of nirvana, the true form of no form, and this, I have transmitted to Mahakashyapa.”

The Buddha, in just lifting up the flower, transmitted what he had realized to Mahakashyapa. He had done many years of ascetic practice and meditation, so his mind was ready to understand and open up to what the Buddha was showing him. This wondrous realm of our true nature manifests in everything—even in just lifting up a flower.

If we use the teaching of the *Heart Sutra* as our guidance, together with sitting in silence and doing our practice of prajnaparamita, then this transmission of the Buddha—this wonderful mind of nirvana that all of us already possess—will become very clear and we, too, will smile like Mahakashyapa.

For my last talk, I will talk about a koan on the bodhisattva Kuan Yin, which is in *The Blue Cliff Record*. Specifically, we will look at how Kuan Yin uses her arms and hands to help us overcome suffering.