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Heart of Wisdom

April 1, 2023



Hello, Tricycle folks! Thank you for tuning in today to consider the *Heart Sutra* and what it might hold for you in terms of understanding and practicing in your ordinary life. The *Heart Sutra*, or, as it's more precisely called, the *Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, is a beloved Mahayana Buddhist text that exists in many translations. All of the translations go right to the point. And I think that's why the *Heart Sutra* is so popular.

The title *Heart Sutra* offers a glimpse of its promise. On the one hand, the heart of anything is the center, the main point. And so the title promises us a teaching of the main point, the heart of the wisdom teachings, the heart of Buddhist wisdom itself. Further, this teaching is given by Avalokiteshvara bodhisattva, the embodiment or archetype of compassion, love, and the teachings of a wise heart.

Perhaps you've been moved by the image of Avalokiteshvara bodhisattva shown over the last few centuries with many tools of service in his or her hands. A shovel, a rake, and maybe a cell phone are all various examples of things that a bodhisattva might use to serve others for the well-being of us all.

This spokesperson of compassion offers a way for us to understand and to become intimate with the deep wisdom teachings that can relieve our suffering and pain. What is it that Avalokiteshvara says to us? The first line reads:

Avalokiteshvara bodhisattva, doing deep *prajnaparamita*,
clearly saw the emptiness of all the five conditions,
thus completely relieving misfortune and pain.

So what is this *prajnaparamita* that we're encouraged to do? It's simply to stop and see the wisdom (*prajna*) of a fresh perspective and the other side of things (*paramita*). Consider how often we get stuck on one side of our perceptions and neglect to listen or see the other side.



When we translate *prajna* as wisdom, it can lead us down a fairly faulty path, because it's not your ordinary smarts. *Prajna* is composed of two elements: *pra* meaning “before” and *jna* meaning “knowing.” So *prajna* can be understood as before-knowing. So there's this time element of not jumping to a conclusion but rather allowing ourselves the space of before knowing, waiting and listening to our whole body as we take in information. This is called doing *prajnaparamita*—directly experiencing reality through the lens of the wisdom teachings. It's a turn toward a fresh, living moment instead of distancing subject and object. Understanding this distinction is the key to the *Heart Sutra*. This quality of before-knowing, before having an idea, before forming an opinion, what is that like?

Just stop for a moment and breathe. Breathe without knowing anything. You might find that it's not so easy to drop the mind that knows, but it can free us and reveal to us far deeper truths than those we thought possible. That before-knowing, that *prajna*, is so different from what we commonly think of as knowledge or judgment. But rather this *prajna* wisdom is the way of being before knowing. It is creative and unvarnished. It doesn't have the overlays of our opinions, of our past, of what we heard yesterday. It is before we create a story or an idea of how things are or how we are. It's a freshness. It is before the word war or tyranny or global warming. It is before bigot and racist—and “them” or “us.” It is before my idea of myself and my failures and my triumphs. Before all of this, before knowing, *prajna*.

We call it wisdom, but it is the fount of creativity. It is the whole source of life, new ways for the mind and heart to be free, to be spontaneous, to be effective. And this *prajna* can only exist in a mind that is willing to free itself. A mind that is free of old paths and structures, highways of thoughts, free of conventional narratives, and alive to the world as it's changing right now. I think of *prajna* as the doorway to my freedom and that of others. It is the path to relieve suffering.

We can't relieve suffering if we lack trust. We have to trust ourselves. We have to trust this moment without all the crutches of what I thought yesterday, what someone told me. In order to



be alive and creative, there has to be trust in this moment, this apprehension of reality. So I call *prajna* trust in all of life. It opens the heart, if we can let it in, and thus we are free.

You could say that we are also protected by this *prajna*. How are we protected? Listen again to the first line of the sutra:

Avalokiteshvara bodhisattva, doing deep prajnaparamita,
clearly saw emptiness of self and the five conditions,
thus completely relieving misfortune and pain.

This instruction is simply to enter wisdom, to allow our hearts and our consciousness to recognize that we are intimately and intricately connected with everything that exists. We are not separate throughout time or space. We ask ourselves: How does recognizing this emptiness, this vacantness, this blankness of what we think we are perceiving as the five conditions—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind—how does that offer relief from our suffering? The sutra explains so clearly:

Oh Shariputra, form is no other than emptiness,
emptiness no other than form.
Form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form.
Sensation, conception, discrimination, awareness are likewise like this.
Oh Shariputra, all dharmas are forms of emptiness...

When we consider and realize that what we see, hear, smell, touch, taste, and think are all empty, we recognize how we're constantly constructing a reality, making a meaning, and placing labels on people, institutions, actions and teachings. After all, the labels and the emotions, the love or the hate arise out of our fixed ideas. They come out of that. When we remember that our names

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and ideas about ourselves and others are just empty tags, we free ourselves—and we free others, too. I see this as the heart teaching of the sutra. Since there is no there there, there is no suffering.

Let me end with what the great haiku poet Masaoka Shiki said on this teaching. He heard people praising the weather, and he said:

Autumn wind:
gods. Buddha—
lies, lies, lies.

Thank you for listening.