

DZC Practicing from the Heart II

Last week, I mentioned that I am currently taken by two particular lines of the Heart Sutra. The first of these lines is the opening of the sutra: “Avaloketesvara, when practicing deeply the Prajna Paramita perceived that all five skandhas are empty and was saved from all suffering and distress.” We briefly explored the meaning of each of the skandhas and the mechanism by which we construct an ego from the process of inserting our desires into the flow of life as it offers itself to us.

This evening, I would like to go on to explore the second line that I find pivotal to our practice: “The Bodhisattva takes refuge in the Prajna Paramita, and the mind is no hindrance.” It seems to me that it would be a great blessing, a great relief to live through a day, or even an hour, when my mind did not pose a hindrance to my living at ease in the world as it arises each moment as a new offering.

Red Pine translates this line of the sutra as:” And live without walls of the mind.” We can spend a great deal of our time and energy building a wall around our small self or ego with the deluded hope that we will be able to protect this very fragile construct of our own creation. The promise of the Heart Sutra is that if we practice to realize the emptiness of the five skandhas, we will be liberated from suffering. To live a life seeking refuge behind the wall of our ego is to live a life of suffering. The wonderful thing about liberation is that when we stop guarding our ego, when we no longer allow our likes and dislikes to create a gap between ourselves and the world, the barrier is removed, and we can experience the world as it generously offers itself to us each moment.

So, what would our mind, our mental activity, our response to the world be like if we no longer approached the world from behind the wall of our ego? Aren't we then just terribly exposed and vulnerable? Here again, the Heart Sutra turns the world on its head, and teaches that when we dismantle the ego, we are able to live fearlessly. When we no longer dedicate the energy of our life to protecting and guarding the ego, to evaluating each and every encounter with the world to see if it compliments or amplifies the story we want to create about our self, we are in fact liberated from the tyranny of our ego.

The Buddha describes the mind free from desire as luminous, as a tranquil pool of water, still and able to clearly reflect the nature of universe. When desire or hatred enters our experience, mind is no longer able to reflect the world as it is arising; now our experience is polluted by toxins, and we get caught up in serving the needs of our ego, not the needs of the world. The Buddha points to two qualities that are essential to calming the waters of our mind: mindfulness and equanimity.

The word "mindfulness" has become quite popular these days. We can find some version of it being taught in classrooms, corporate meetings and on the football field. But much of what is taught as mindfulness is merely awareness. For example, when we use the term "mindfulness of anger" we are not saying that we are merely aware of our anger, or paying attention to our anger. Awareness and mindfulness are not the same. Mindfulness is always a wholesome state. One can be aware that one is angry all day and not move a step closer to transforming it.

Mindfulness engages us in transformation. Andrew Olendzki describes mindfulness as ["an attitude of confident equanimity, a presence of](#)

mind in which the object is neither favored nor opposed.” “Mindfulness as a mental state is always healing and never afflictive.” Anger and hatred are unwholesome states characterized by aversion, a very different state from that of mindfulness. We are not able to embody both an unwholesome and a wholesome state in the same moment. Try it. Can you feel greedy and content or generous in the same moment? Can you feel angry and loving in the same moment? We are capable of rapidly shifting between two states that have vastly different qualities, but we do not hold them together in the same mind-moment.

Equanimity is the balanced state of mind, the midpoint between desire and aversion. It is often confused with apathy or indifference, but this is not correct. Equanimity is fully engaged with experience, but it is free of the desire or aversion that we might add to it. Any moment that we can engage with the world free from anger, greed or delusion, the three toxins, is a moment of liberation, or enlightenment. When we add our likes and dislikes to experience, we cloud the waters of our mind and we are no longer able to offer the service to others or the world that may be needed. Once we add desire or hatred to an experience, we are left with only serving ourselves.

The world offers itself to us each moment. And in each moment we have a choice. We can engage with the world with the desires of our ego held foremost, or we can engage in the world with mindfulness and equanimity. The Heart Sutra tells us that if we choose the way of the ego, we will suffer. But if we choose the way of practice, we will find joy in responding to the universe as it offers itself. We can strive to stop the arising flow of universe and attempt to place ownership on it, calling it “mine.” We can devote ourselves to merely being an artist by trying to tease out particular elements of experience that are to our liking and

staking a claim of ownership, or we can devote ourselves to the art of living.

I would like to close with something that Katagiri Rochi said:

There are two way to take care of your life. You can develop yourself as an artist, or you can forget yourself and devote your life to art. That's a big difference. The first is to enslave yourself in your ego. It feels good for a while, but it doesn't last for long. This is to become a host for the guest. The second way is to become a host for the host. You must turn your ego into fuel and burn your life for the benefit of all beings. You will become a kind of fool. But this is the way to find peace. Just climb the mountain, every day.