

DZC Introduction to the Heart Sutra III

The setting and characters of the Heart Sutra:

- Takes place within the Buddha's meditation.
- Reported by Ananda: "Thus have I heard."
- The sutra is a conversation between two characters:
 - Shantideva, the wisest disciple of the Buddha
 - Avalokitesvara is the Bodhisattva of compassion

Shariputra sees Avalokitesvara meditating on the deep perfection of wisdom, and he recognizes that by doing so, Avalokitesvara has freed himself from suffering. Avalokitesvara looks down from on high and sees the five skandhas as empty of their own self or substance, and this realization is what frees him from suffering.

In the longer version of the sutra, Shariputra asks a question at this point, which we could insert between the first and second stanzas of the shorter version which we chant. He asks Avalokitesvara about his practice because Shariputra recognizes that the bodhisattva has liberated himself from suffering, and Shariputra wishes to do so himself. The Heart Sutra is Avalokitesvara's response to Shariputra.

In the first two sections of the Sutra, Avalokitesvara tells Shantideva that everything that we think of as our person or self exists only as a constantly changing process of causes and conditions. This is referred to as the five skandhas of form,

feeling, perceptions, impulses and consciousness. We are real only as the arising of emptiness in this moment. Emptiness is a term for interdependent co-origination. The sutra also states that emptiness is only manifest in form. It does not exist outside form as some kind of fixed law of the universe. Emptiness is itself dependent, arising only in form.

The third section of the sutra tells us that the same is true of all phenomena. Here, the word “dharma” spelled with a small “d” is used to indicate all “things.” This means that anything we can name, any place in time or space, any concept or idea we might have, is dependent, impermanent and exists only in emptiness.

The fourth section of the sutra states:

Therefore in Emptiness, no form, no feeling no perceptions, no impulses, no consciousness;

No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind;

No color, no sounds, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind;

No realm of eyes and so forth until no realm of mind-consciousness:

The fourth section begins by repeating this same theme again, emphasizing the emptiness of the five skandhas. It then goes on to state that any part of the pathway by which we may come to

sense the world is also empty. Beginning with the sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, etc.), going on to the experience received by the sense organ (color, sound, smell, etc.) and continuing on to our awareness of the sense input (realm of eyes and so forth), the sutra is stating that this process is also dependent on causes and conditions, that it exists only in emptiness.

So far, the sutra has addressed the empty nature of the self, the empty nature of all phenomena, and the empty nature of emptiness itself. It now goes on to address the empty nature of the very teachings of the Buddha, “Dharma” spelled with a large “D.”

The next section of the sutra reads:

No Ignorance and also no extinction of it, and so forth until no old age and death and also no extinction of them;

These lines refer to the twelve links of dependent origination. In Buddhist texts, a list of items is often indicated by naming the first and the last elements of the list. In the case of the twelve links of dependent origination, “ignorance” is the first term, and “old age and death” is the final element. The intervening ten links are implied by the naming of the first and last elements of the list.

Early Buddhist texts used the term “dependent origination.” In later Mahayana Buddhist texts, we find the term “interdependent co-origination.”

In early Buddhism the flow is linear, going progressively in one direction only; in later Buddhism all twelve elements are interconnected.

Here are the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination:

1. Ignorance (Avidya)

Avidya means lack of light or lack of understanding. In Buddhism, "ignorance" usually refers to ignorance of the Four Noble Truths, in particular that life involves *dukkha*, translated as suffering, or dissatisfaction. Ignorance also refers to ignorance of *anatman*, a teaching that there is no "self" in the sense of a permanent, integral, autonomous being within an individual existence.

2. Volitional Formation (Samskara)

Ignorance leads to volitional action, formation, impulse, motivation, or karma formation. Out of ignorance come thoughts, words and actions that sow the seeds of *karma*. Samskara are the impulses that come before action, and action creates karma.

3. Consciousness (Vijnana)

Very generally consciousness is what happens when one of the six faculties (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind) reacts to or becomes aware of one of the six external phenomena (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and ideas and thoughts.)

4. Name and Form (Nama-rupa)

Nama-rupa is name and form, corporeality and mentality, the joining of the five [skandhas](#) into an individual existence. With name and form also comes sensory perception.

5. Faculties and Objects (Shadayatana)

The Vijnana, or consciousness, link the six faculties or sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind) and six corresponding external phenomena, or objects (visible form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and ideas and thoughts). The faculties and their corresponding objects are the shadayatana.

6. Contact (Sparsha)

Sparsha is contact with environment, or the contact with the faculties and object

7. Sensation (Vedana)

Vedana is the recognition and experience of sensations. These experiences are pleasurable or painful, which leads to desire and aversion.

8. Craving (Trishna)

The [Second Noble Truth](#) teaches that trishna -- thirst, desire or craving -- is the cause of stress or suffering ([dukkha](#)).

If we are not mindful, we are perpetually being jerked around by desire for what we want and aversion of what we don't

want. In this state we heedlessly create [karma](#), which keeps us entangled in the cycle of [rebirth](#).

9. Clinging or Grasping (Upadana)

Upadana is a grasping and clinging mind. We cling to sensual pleasures, mistaken views, external forms and appearances. Most of all, we cling to ego and a sense of an individual self, a sense reinforced moment-to-moment by our cravings and aversions.

10. Becoming (Bhava)

Bhava is now becoming, set in motion by the other links. Becoming conditions the next link, birth.

11. Birth (Jati)

The cycle of rebirth naturally includes birth.

12. Old Age and Death (Jara-maranam)

The chain comes to old age and death, or the dissolution of what came to be. The karma of one life sets in motion another life, rooted in ignorance (avidya). A circle is closed.

The next lines of the Heart Sutra read:

No suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path. Each of these terms refers to one of the elements of the Four Noble Truths.

This is a negation of the Four Noble Truths as having a permanent, unchanging, self-contained identity. The Four Noble Truths are empty as well.

I. There is suffering in life:

Eight kinds:

- Birth
- Aging
- Sickness
- Death
- Contact with something we do not like or desire
- Separation from something we do like or desire
- We can't get what we want
- Dissatisfaction with the groundlessness of life, the egolessness, impermanence of life.
An underlying feeling that something is lacking

2. No origination = no cause

The Second Noble Truth states that the cause of suffering is desire or “thirst,” a feeling that something is lacking and we try to fill that emptiness.

We constantly run after the things we desire, and avoid the things we do not like. We look for deep satisfaction in temporarily fulfilling our desires. When we realize that we are not able to address the groundlessness of life by

temporarily fulfilling our desires, we are ready to begin a spiritual practice.

3. No stopping – the cessation of suffering

The Third Noble Truth is that there is a way to end, or stop, suffering. The Heart Sutra is stating here that the Third Noble Truth is empty as well.

4. No path – refers to the eight-fold path:

- Right View
- Right Thought
- Right Speech
- Right action
- Right Livelihood
- Right meditation
- Right mindfulness
- Right concentration

The twelve links of dependent origination explain the first two of the four noble truths in more detail. Our lives become suffering because our actions are based on ignorance and desires.

In the first noble truth, suffering is equated with the 5 skandhas. But since the 5 skandhas are empty of self-existence, suffering must also be empty of self-existence. Thus in emptiness there is no suffering, no

source of suffering, no relief from suffering and no path leading to relief from suffering.

So we must realize the middle way in regard to the Buddha's teaching as well. The Buddha's teaching is empty of self-identity.

Shohaku Okumura says:

The Heart Sutra thus appears to deny the core of the Buddha's teaching. This negation of Buddhism points beyond Buddhism. In other words, Buddhism negating Buddhism is still Buddhism. The Heart Sutra says that to truly live the Buddha's teachings, we must negate it. A true student of the Buddha must go beyond the study of his teaching as recorded in the scriptures. When we directly experience the Buddha's truth in our own lives, his teachings and the scriptures are irrelevant. The truth becomes a vivid reality. Seeing the reality of our own lives with our own eyes through our practice is the wisdom that sees emptiness. This is the wisdom that is called Prajna. This is why prajna is called the mother of buddhas.

No Cognition, also no attainment.

Neither attainment nor non-attainment exists in emptiness.

There is no person to gain understanding, and there is no

enlightenment that exists independently that we can grasp.

The relative truth would indicate that there is a practitioner who desires to achieve enlightenment.

The ultimate truth would indicate that there is no one and no teaching that exists independently.

Because understanding and enlightenment do not exist “out there” someplace, they are not something we grasp, something we are separate from. We are empty, and therefore full of everything. Enlightenment is empty and therefore full of everything. We already have enlightenment. Therefore there is nothing to attain.

The first sections of the Heart Sutra address the attachments that arise from maintaining the reality of the skandhas and other categories. Wisdom arises when we realize the empty nature of self, phenomenon and the teachings of the Buddha. Now, lest people think of enlightenment as a state to be attained, we are told that there is nothing to be attained, nothing to be grasped.

Our world always has the potential for both samsara and nirvana. We are responsible for what we create. There is no objective samsara or objective nirvana.

In zazen we let go of all illusions, good and bad, all emotions, and accept reality without separating it into negative or undesirable parts and positive or desirable parts.

In bodhisattva practice we try to see reality before separation. We are phenomena caused by many different elements and factors. This dynamic interpenetration works constantly. Nothing exists independently. When we see this reality it's very natural to try to be kind and helpful to others. When we see this reality we cannot avoid taking the bodhisattva vow.

In his book, "Living by Vow," Shohaku Okumura says:

It is said there is a river between this shore of samsara and the other shore of nirvana, and a bodhisattva operates the ferry, traveling freely between shores but not abiding on either...

We don't practice to reach the other shore. We always practice on this shore. In fact, we don't separate this shore from the other. Both shores are right now, right here. If we separate this shore from the other, we generate dualism and contradiction. There's no way to escape this shore and attain the other. In reality there is no separation. We practice in this world, in this society; to carry out the bodhisattva vow, to walk with all living beings, to help and support each other. Then we

can find nirvana right here within samsara. We vow eventually to transform samsara into nirvana without escape.

Our practice is not an escape from a worldly life of desire and delusion. It is not a method to “attain” enlightenment or wisdom. We just sit in the absolute reality that is before separation into enlightenment and delusion. They are both here. We negate nothing. We accept everything as reality and work together with it. There is no one to attain enlightenment and no enlightenment to be attained. The Heart Sutra says this is wisdom or prajna. To see that there is no separation between delusion and enlightenment or between ignorance and wisdom is true enlightenment, true wisdom. This prajna is often called the wisdom of nondiscrimination. It means to see both sides as a whole and create our own way of life based on this absolute reality. This is what Dogen Zenji called *shikantaza*, just sitting. (pg. 190)