

# **The Heart Sutra**

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The focus that we have this weekend in on the Heart Sutra and I will start by saying something about studying the dharma and what that means. Then I'll go on and go through the Heart Sutra line by line and try to make sense of it both in traditional terms and in terms of western psychological thinking, in particular bringing the idea of emptiness and what that means. That will be interspersed with time for sitting meditation and reflection on what's been discussed. Tomorrow afternoon we'll take some of that into a more tantric view of visualisation and practice.

But first of all to think in general about the place of study in dharma practice. Traditionally the teachings of the Buddha are represented as being three baskets, or three containers. These are the vinaya, the sutras, and the abhidharma. The vinaya is a sections of text which deal with morality, with rules about behaviour, what you should do, what you shouldn't do. The sutras deal with the nature of meditation, and reflections by Shakyamuni Buddha on the place of meditation in life. He teaches through examples, like how Jesus used parables. Then the third part, the abhidharma – abhi means “first” and “dharma” means “reality” in this context – so the abhidharma deals with the basics of reality. Abhidharma texts analyse perception and ordinary experience and try to explore the assumptions that we operate from.

## **THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS: SUFFERING**

Because as the Buddha said in his first teachings, “We are all caught up in suffering” and this suffering has a cause. And the cause has different parts. Partly it's our habitual behaviour that we respond in a very unconscious way and that's what the teachings on morality seek to take charge of. Then suffering also arises because we make assumptions about the nature of the phenomena that we experience. That is to say we take the assumptions of language to be real. So that we imagine that when we use words – that when we say, “This is a room – this is a beautiful room with nice flowers” – this is referring to something actually real, substantial.

And on the basis of this sort of assumption we continue in the subject–object pattern which gives rise to samsara. So the abhidharma section – this section of the three baskets, the Tripitaka – is the antidote to the assumptions of the ordinary understanding. Thirdly is the sutra section which is dealing with meditation. This goes to the deepest level of analysis in looking at thoughts as they arise.

So these sections of the teachings are set out in order to give us more confidence and more ease, both in being in ourselves, and being in the world with other people.

So I mean many of us maybe have had the experience in school of having to learn a lot of information which we could never understand why we were having to learn it. And it maybe that normally in order to live our lives we actually don't need to know very much. And we can also see that in order to practise the dharma we actually just need a few particular practices to do and feel that that's enough. And in particular if we are practising tantric visualisation, making use of colour, and sound, there's an enormous power in this practice to transform the quality of our experience. Nonetheless this kind of practice is embedded in a particular view, a particular understanding of how it is to be a subject in the world. And certainly in my own experience of having studied quite a lot about Buddhist philosophy, both through Tibetan sources and through translations, I think it is very helpful for meditation practice. Because even in tantric practice, when we look into the symbolism of the deity, to the clothes that they wear, to the things that the deity holds, and to the nature of the mandala house in which they live, each of these qualities that the bodhisattvas are wearing and representing are aspects of the dharma teachings of these three baskets.

For example, if we think of Guru Rinpoche, of Padmasambhava, he is normally described as wearing monk's robes, which is a symbol that he embodies or represents very pure morality. And this means that he represents the vinaya, all the teachings on the discrimination between good and bad actions. He also wears the rich robes of the bodhisattva; rainbow-coloured silk robes, and this represents the rich variety of his compassionate being in the world – his ability to respond to others in the precise nature of their need. Now all the tantric deities, all these practices have commentaries in which it's explained the correlation, the relationship between the description of the deity and the general understanding of Buddhist philosophy.

## **SYMBOLISM IN TANTRA**

So in tantric practice what one has is a condensation or a distillation of all the various facets of Buddhist understanding. and while in order to do the meditation practice you don't have to be a great scholar, you don't have to spend years and years studying these things, yet there are many allusions, there are many symbolisations which if you don't understand the, somehow there is less potency in the form of the deity. Say for example you went to an art gallery to look at an exhibition of renaissance art and you didn't know anything about Greek or Roman mythology and you didn't know anything about Christian symbolism, particularly medieval symbolism. You could see the paintings and you could be very impressed by the colours and the dynamic quality of the figures, the gestures, but there would be all sorts of subtle nuances, all sorts of meanings represented by the painters which you would be completely blind to. Of course you could go in as an art expert, tearing the painting apart to pull out these symbols, to steal knowledge as it were from them. But in that way you would miss the aesthetic richness, the living quality, of a beautiful painting.

So what one needs is to bring together the aesthetic openness of the heart and the sense through which one would respond to the painting, plus the knowledge of the meanings of the symbols, of the history that are embedded in them. And these two streams running together give you a total impact of the image. All the study that we can do into Buddhist philosophy is ultimately only of value to us if we turn it into strengthening and deepening our meditation. And this knowledge of information and analysis has been developed as a method of helping us to deepen our meditation.

So we need to make sure that when we study something we get some sense of what we are going to do with it. These are tools, like we have a knife and fork to eat food, these Buddhist concepts are for helping us to cut into reality and to digest the world to break down the subject–object division. Traditionally they talk of three stages of study or practice. First there is hearing, or maybe more often in our case, reading. Then thinking or contemplation. And then finally meditation. It's said to be hearing, and many of the things we hear we can also read in books and part of the reason why it's important to hear people talking about the dharma is that one can get a living sense that it makes sense for somebody else.

Hopefully you will feel at ease enough here to ask questions otherwise you won't know whether I am some kind of parrot repeating things that I have heard and I haven't understood. Because it's very important to understand whether this knowledge can be applied and can become something that's flexible and that helps us to respond to life, rather than being a dogma which sits and keeps us tight and so separated off from the free–flow of life itself.

We are fifteen or so people in this room and we will each have our own personality, each have our own way of being in the world. Some people here may be predominantly feeling types and learn through having an emotional contact with something. Others may be more thinking types and able to have their primary access through thinking and intellectually understanding something. And for this kind of person getting a conceptual overview gives a sense of order and direction is very reassuring. Other people may be more doing types who are concerned, who learn by doing something, by actually being caught up in it through the process of direct involvement. And other people perhaps live more in terms of being. Of being in the presence of something and just absorbing it as it were through a process of osmosis. In Europe we don't pay much attention to this last kind, we tend to think that we have to be very dynamic and active in the world if we want to get anywhere.

In India, in Hinduism and certainly in Buddhism as well there is the idea of darshan or satsang – darshan means to be able to see to view the presence of the other. “Satsang” means, “sat” means both truth and being and “sang” its the same root as in sangha – it

means assemble or “being in the presence of”. So it means being in the presence of people who have some realisation of some practice.

So there are these different styles and each of us will have a predominance in one or other of them. The topic that we are particularly covering this weekend – the Heart Sutra – is probably easiest for people who have a predominance in the thinking function because it has to do with the analysis of the categories through which we understand phenomena. So it’s important to be aware of yourself and to recognise what happens to you when you are confronted with a whole lot of stuff, a whole lot of ideas. It might excite you, or it might just make you feel kind of stupid or maybe very angry. And we have to remember that the Buddha taught many many different paths to enlightenment. He wasn’t insisting that everybody follow the same path. Nonetheless although we maybe need to recognise that maybe that this sort of way into the dharma is perhaps rather difficult for us I think it is worthwhile making some struggle, some effort, to get some idea of what a text like the Heart Sutra is about.

## **THE SECOND TURNING OF THE WHEEL OF DHARMA**

The Heart Sutra belongs to what is called the “second turning of the wheel of the dharma”. The first turning of the wheel of the dharma is represented by the teaching that Buddha Shakyamuni gave in the deer park at Sarnath. And some of you, if you have been in India or seen Tibetan monasteries, or seen pictures of them, might have noticed that on the roof of almost all Tibetan monasteries over the front door there are two deer looking at a wheel. And these two deer represent the deer in the deer park where the Buddha first taught. And the wheel represents ... it’s called “the turning of the wheel of the dharma“. A wheel gives the sense of effortlessly moving and so it implies a sense of inevitability. There’s also a sense that it’s a royal symbol. It represents a chariot in which a king would ride. It also represents a vehicle, a more rapid way of travelling than going on your own legs. And it also represents a turning around a central point.

Samsara turns around the central point of the ego, of a self identification. This is the root of suffering, of attachment to the self, that I exist apart from the world. And the central point of nirvana or liberation is the letting go of the sense of self. That in the very centre of every wheel there is a point that does not turn. So this wheel represents both nirvana and samsara.

So anyway the Buddha taught in this park at Sarnath and he taught the four noble truths. I am sure that this is something that you are familiar with, but I’ll just go over it again very briefly, suffering, the cause of suffering, the ending of suffering and the path to the ending of suffering. In this first teaching of the wheel of the dharma, which is normally seen as being a Theravadin, or from the Tibetan point of view, a Hinayana teaching; the cause of suffering is attachment. So it’s as if my self is like a hand it wants to get hold of something, so if there is something for it to get hold of it feels comfortable. Now if I open my grasp and let go then there is nothing to hold on to. But if the hand has been trained

for a long time to grasp something it gets sort of twitchy, it wants something. And it keeps looking like if a baby's playing with something and you take it away, its hand keeps going because it liked the feel of whatever it was that it was holding on to.

This is the way that the karmic impulse operates, the tendency to repeat the same action to go back. It wants to get some more of the same thing. And by doing stilling meditation, by calming the mind, by not being involved in the phenomena that are arising in the mind there is a space between the karmic impulse and the one who would normally identify with the impulse. So the practice that one is concerned with there is to reduce the impulse that one has to grasp onto things.

So that's why in these Theravada or Hinayana teachings there is a great stress on renunciation and that there is a great emphasis on becoming a nun or a monk, on giving up the worldly life, sexual activity, occupations directed towards finance and power and status in the world. So that one has a particular position that one has taken up that acts as an antidote to all the different situations of temptations that arise. Just as somebody might stop drinking alcohol, then they don't have to think, "Oh well I won't drink beer but I maybe I'll drink wine if it is a good vintage" because the level of renunciation is a deeper level – it's alcohol. And alcohol is the common nature that runs through all the different kinds of alcohol that exist. So it's a one-liner, you've cut off the whole thing. So if you are a monk or a nun you say, "I won't have any sex at all" whereas ordinarily you might say, "Well I might have sex with you, but I won't have sex with you, or I might have sex with you on Monday, but not on Tuesday" and you get into all sorts of adaptations.

Of course that makes the world very simple because you are no longer so concerned with how people look or what they are interested in or if they are interested in you, it's just that that's not your bag, that's not what you are into any more. There's less hooks in the world drawing you out towards them and so you can slip through the world more easily. And generally all the rules around morality that are about monks' and nuns' vows and general lay peoples' vows about not killing or stealing or telling lies, or whatever, they are all concerned with simplifying the impression of the world, simplifying the exciting qualities of object so that the mind won't be so stimulated.

And I think it is very important to understand this that these are methods to help us in our meditation, these are not real statements of the truth: "To live like this is to better than to live like that." They are pragmatic.

Then secondly in terms of meditation, the main kinds of meditation which are connected with this view, are ones which are directed towards calming the mind. Externally through morality we have simplified the external world and now through the meditation we are calming down our urge to go out and fascinated by things. And usually at first when we start to do calming meditation we become aware of how confused and jangly our thoughts are. Externally we may feel that we are somehow rational beings, making clear decisions about our lives but when we start to become aware of the way that thoughts and

feelings arise in meditation we realise just how out of control and how peculiar we are inside. Just like somebody who is very stoned on cannabis is just fascinated by everything and can look at their hand in amazement. When we sit and try to keep our minds focused on our breath or something else we realise how fascinating every other thought is.

## **MEDITATION AND THE GAP**

So that's what this kind of meditation is trying to do, is to simplify things and to stop the magical fascination that we seem to have with whatever is arising in our mind. It's maybe a little bit like a baby who gets into playing in its own shit and is quite fascinated by the smell and the taste. Because the shit is both self because it came out of my body, and it's not self. And similarly the thoughts that arise in our minds in meditation they are like our own shit, they are our creativity, but are they self or not self? And we get very fascinated sniffing around. So this kind of meditation is like a potty training that we learn to put our shit into one little pot, the pot of the breath or the pot of the statue, or whatever is our focus of attention. And then the Buddha says "Good little boy, good little girl."

So basically it is about trying to create this gap and in a sense to keep us clean, just like a small child being trained to shit in the right place, because then you can be more at ease in the world. Then the third aspect that I talked of in the beginning, the abhidharma, on this level this is connected with the analysis of the categories of phenomena in the world. And there are many different systems of analysis that were developed historically. We'll look at just two of the most simple and important ones. And in particular these are the two which are mentioned in the Heart Sutra. Because the Heart Sutra is particularly important because the Heart Sutra represents the crossover point from this Hinayana or Theravadin viewpoint into the Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, which is the philosophy which underpins the whole of tantric practice and you could say the whole of dzogchen.

Now I am using lots of technical terms and you may not know what some of these mean, but we'll have a space soon to ask questions, and I am happy to explain any of the words that I have been using.

## **The three marks of conditioned existence**

In the Buddhist teachings in the Hinayana there are said to be three marks of conditioned existence. Are these are said that all phenomena are suffering, they have suffering as a part of their nature, nothing is apart from suffering. Also all phenomena are impermanent, and all phenomena are devoid of inherent self-nature. And if you study Buddhism in Thailand or Burma or some place like that you will find that again and again they will come back to that focus on these three particular points. But first of all we have to think "what does it mean 'all phenomena'?" I'm using this word phenomena to represent the Sanskrit word "dharma". And the word dharma means both the teachings of the Buddha,

it also means each particular thing that exists, each phenomena, and it also means reality. These are the three main ways in which the word is used.

In this sense talking of these three signs of conditioned existence it means dharma as phenomena. Now of course if we have to think of each phenomena as it arises then every time we meet it we have to wonder what is it? If I hold this up and you don't know what this is you have to work out what it is. But the way our perception works is that when we encounter a phenomena we have various categories through which we recognise what it is, we locate it in various ways. Thus we might say this is red. Now roughly it is red, but it also maybe more maroon, or ox blood coloured. So red would be a rough category, and if we were an artist and we really wanted this colour we would have a very precise name to put on it. So all the time we have particular categories into which we pull all the phenomena of the world and place them inside the field of our knowledge. This is how we sort of order the gestalts of our perception.

But often these gestalts or categories are simply cultural constructs. They don't represent any profound level of truth. They are simply patterns of interpretation which make sense in the field of knowledge of our own culture which is changing through time. In the simple way if we don't know much about it at least most of us recognise that this is a tree. But some people know the names of most trees. And other people know so much about trees that they know the Latin names, and they can go to other countries and locate new kinds of trees they've never even seen before inside their Linnaean families. And in Buddhism they have a similar, a bit like the way Linnaeus went around working out these genuses and families in botany, they started to work out these categories or families of phenomena.

And the most common system became developed as the five skandhas. Skandha means a heap or a pile. So it's as if everything that is manifest in the world can be sorted into five different heaps or categories. And these are form, feeling, perception, association or composition, and consciousness. And I'll go into exactly what these mean in some detail. But I think maybe first we could see if there are any questions.

### **Questions about suffering**

**Question:** About the four noble truths. Why is the way to end suffering the fourth one? What was the third one?

There is suffering – that suffering exists– then there is the cause of suffering. The third is the cessation of suffering, which indicates the fact that suffering can end. And then the fourth is the way to bring about the end. Because otherwise somebody might think, life is suffering, that's it. Nothing to do. But what is saying is that yes, suffering is very important but it's not eternal it has a cause.

**Question:**[Our group came to the conclusion it's not the objects that suffer but we that suffer when looking at objects and seeing that they won't look nice after twenty years.]

So suffering is in the subject not in the object?

[And also it was difficult to see that a non-living things like this picture can really suffer. We weren't able to see that this object is suffering. There was no... We weren't able to recognise it.]

Maybe I don't know if everyone can follow that if it is just in English. Any other thoughts?

**Question:** What is suffering? Then she came to the conclusion that when things are taken out of their natural surrounding, or like a tree is cut to make paper out of it or whatever, that this could be suffering. Then the difficulty is what is with this artificial things, because like lamps or whatever? So they found out that there is a difference between natural objects and artificial ones. And with the artificial ones it's more that they cause suffering for the lets say people or whatever. And also the distinction between organic and inorganic. She thought that inorganic material wouldn't suffer.

Which I'm not sure of. I think it's very different to make a distinction because you don't know. We don't know what a stone feels like. (?) that subject and object are the same that is something I can only understand when I am in a meditative state of mind, but not when I am rational and functioning in my daily life. That is for me, or for us, the most hard thing to understand.]

Any other thoughts?

**Question:** She was pondering if the light ray when it is broken by a window or whatever, if it is then suffering. Because otherwise she couldn't figure out how a light ray can suffer. My personal feeling is that somehow there is this difficulty about things. Artificial things, of course they don't have any nerves or whatever in our sense, so what does then suffering mean. Does suffering only mean something if you have a sensory perception like we have or maybe animals have?]

In the Buddhist tradition only creatures with minds suffer. In the Tibetan language they talk of semchen, those having sem, or mind. So from that traditional point of view the idea that a plant could suffer would be ridiculous. Imagine in lonely isolated places in Tibet if a tree is standing alone that might become the habitation for ghosts or spirits of some kind and these spirits might be suffering. Also ghosts and local spirits are particularly fond of door frames. But the inanimate things in themselves don't suffer.

And this goes back to the fact that suffering is in the subject that does the suffering. But it does also mean that from a traditional point of view any object at all can be a cause of suffering for us. But often in life we imagine that there are some objects that will never

hurt us or harm us. And if you think of it, even the dharma causes suffering because you try to sit and meditate and you get sore knees, and even at the weekend instead of being able to relax you come in a place like this. So in these ways we can imagine that something will be a source of pleasure but actually it can rapidly turn into suffering. Traditionally suffering is classified in three groups.

There is **firstly suffering of suffering** which means that when there is something which is clearly a suffering, maybe like a back ache, then you suffer because of that suffering. [But why do you call it suffering of suffering?] Because Buddha thought of everything don't worry! Because for example, say you become depressed, or you become anxious, there is the depression itself, but there is also the feeling that I shouldn't be depressed, "Why am I depressed?" So there is the suffering itself – the pain in your knees itself, that's one level, but there is also the feeling that this shouldn't be troubling me. why is this happening to me. So one suffers from the suffering. by not accepting it, it becomes the enemy.

The **second kind of suffering is called the suffering of change**. And that's when good things turn bad. But also when bad things or bad situations become good. Because certainly working in therapy you can see that many people are tormented by hope and that if you could predict my life would just be depressed, then OK. But suddenly somebody's nice or friendly or you think you might have a relationship or whatever, and then there is all this hope and this disturbance and a confusion, so that there is a change that is disturbing. Now a lot of our culture is predicated on the basis of excitement. You know going to the movies, falling in love, getting drunk, being ambitious, getting possessions, you know the culture says that this kind of excitement will make you happy.

On the plane coming over I was reading a newspaper and there was a big article about an English fashion designer called Paul Smith. And Paul Smith usually designs only men's clothes, usually in black. But he's just opened a new collection of women's clothes in very nice shades of blue. And the person writing the article was very excited about this. And it's this kind of excitement which is permeating our culture all the time. It's actually quite difficult in the moment to see how this sort of excitement is actually a cause of suffering. But then when you actually look at the clothes – first of all they are very expensive, and in order to wear them you have to be very tall, very thin and very young! Which is bad news for most of us. And many many situations are like this where a commodity, a substance is presented to us as if it will carry some hope for us, but when we actually enter into a relationship with it we feel a dissatisfaction.

But then when that disappointment arises, because most of us don't like ourselves very much, we blame ourselves, that there is something wrong with us that we are not able to make use of this commodity, rather than thinking, "what an asshole to set up this whole silly nonsense." So instead of his new collection being a gift of kindness, it's actually the opportunity for many thousands of people to feel ugly, stupid and humiliated.

“If only I was different then I would be able to make use of this wonderful thing, and then my life would be complete.” So it means that the living subject is subjugated, is put under the power of the dead object which is always being reinforced because the subject torments itself and puts itself down. It’s in this way that the dead object, the thing out there, the dead object is invested with power and significance, and my inability to come into contact with this good object I identify as a sign of my own failing, and so I have to work harder, strive harder to become one who is worthy of this good object. But because of the nature of modern capitalistic production new objects are being produced all the time, so as soon as I make myself worthy of one object it’s out of date and I need to struggle then for the next object. And you see this particularly in fashion which in many ways is the dominant metaphor of our culture. So that’s the way in which the suffering of change is operating; that one never arrives at a point of stability and even if we do get into a stable situation, we then start to feel bored and then we long for some excitement. Because the ability just to be fully in our sense and just to be fascinated and satisfied by the most simple phenomena that are arising is very rare. It’s very difficult to hang on to that.

Because the tendency that our consciousness has to enter into judgement, to sort things out as good or bad, is being intensified all the time by the pressure and the culture around us. And so we get drawn more and more away from the possibility of realising this state of Samantabhadra, or always good, which is the central image of the Nyingma system of the nature of enlightenment.

And the **third form of suffering is described as a very subtle kind of suffering** and it’s usually said that in our ordinary state because we are so caught up in gross suffering we don’t experience this, and it’s compared to like having a hair on the palm of your hand or having that hair in your eye. And if it’s in our eye we feel it, and if it’s on our hand we don’t. But because most of the time we are so tormented by gross suffering, our sensitivity thickens up like the palms of our hand when we do physical work, so we don’t experience this more subtle level. The subtle suffering is the very experience of being a subject interacting with objects. It’s the feeling tone of dualistic experience itself. It’s the subtle feeling tone of subject–object interaction. So that when we sit and do a calming meditation and we find ourselves caught up in thoughts, most of the time we are quite interested in the thoughts that come. The subject that is doing the knowing of the thought or the object or the feeling that’s occurring, in that moment of being aware of the object that’s arising is reaffirmed in the meaning of its own existence. Because in this idea, subject and object always arise together. There is no consciousness without an object.

Traditional illustration of this is the question that was asked of the Buddha, “If in a distant forest where there is nobody present a tree falls, does it make a sound?” What do you think? Would it make a sound? Why?

**Question:** Only if there's an ear? What is a sound? Maybe it's more obvious with seeing somehow because the colours are not there if there is no capacity. It seems to me that is easier.]

But we can imagine that there would be a sound because we can imagine a tree falling and we imagine there would be a sound, but that sound is being created in our thoughts as we think about it. The sound itself we can't... I mean the sound without a hearer is...!

**Question:** You could install some equipment for recording it.

OK there is a tape recorder in the forest and nobody ever goes to inspect this tape recorder. Is there a sound? From this point of view there has to be a subject somewhere. And I think this is absolutely vital that subject and object occur together. You can't have a latent sound in a tape recorder. In terms of Buddhist understanding and the practice of meditation, this is absolutely vital that we have this sense because the highest realms of samsara are the states of pure consciousness. In Buddhist cosmology in the centre of the world is this huge mountain called Mount Meru. It's forty thousands yojanas high, and a yojana is about seven miles, which is more than ten kilometres, it's about half a million kilometres high. And on the top of this are the god realms. There are the realms where the gods have a flesh body and then with increasing levels of subtlety they have light bodies. And then right at the very very top there are four levels of pure consciousness.

## **CONSCIOUSNESS WITH NO OBJECT**

The very highest level of this is a consciousness that has no object. Now that state is created by doing this calming shiné meditation for a long time. So that in doing this calming meditation the last thought has gone and now it's just open and calm and there seems to be no thoughts at all. And because one has practised for a long time, an open expanse of calmness opens. And so these great meditators go into this state in which because there is no thought at all there is nothing around which to crystallise any body. There is just this state of pure consciousness. What they didn't realise though was the last thought that they had was actually a boomerang. And then after some time, maybe after a hundred thousand years, maybe a million years, this little boomerang goes round "UH! What the hell was that? What am I doing here?" and then it starts all over again!

Because this state of consciousness needs a thought. It cannot be separated from thought. Now this might seem a bit kind of medieval, the things that you know medieval monks would think about – "How many angels there are on the top of a pin?" But it's very important that when we come in to look at the Heart Sutra because this state of consciousness when people feel that the only thing that causing me suffering is having thoughts coming and disturbing my consciousness then they have the notion that if only I can get rid of all these bad disturbing thoughts – if only I can get rid of the other – then I myself will be complete. I will be entire and so I will be happy.

We can see that this view is quite common in our world. If only we can get rid of all the people who are not the same as us, then we will have a pure place in which everyone will be happy. All my troubles come because these outsiders who are not the same as me come in here and upset me. And so there is a desire to push out the disturbance and to create a wall, behind which I will be safe. But the nature of the mind is that it is creative, that thoughts keep arising. And so the only way that you can try to not be disturbed by your thoughts is to kill off all your creativity.

And so that from the Buddhist point of view this state of highest consciousness is like being brain-dead because it's trying to achieve a state of consciousness without object when in fact subject and object on the level on consciousness always arise together. Subject changes and object changes in response to subject. So our subject – our embodied subject – changes and the world changes against us. There is no way to stabilise the setting that we have in the world. So to try to halt a process which is dynamic and changing can only be done either by attacking the other or to turn it against oneself, and say, “I will not be this, I will not become what I must become.” So subject and object are involved in change. The only way I can try to stop that change is to resist difference or change in the world of object out there by pushing out the other like the fascist solution. “you are not me; you are nothing to do with me” Or that anger can be turned on oneself “I will not be this.” Like “I will not have thoughts”. It's a kind of resistance.

**Student:** What is a sutra? How does it fit in with other types of Buddhism]

The word sutra means basically something that's said. There are Theravadin sutras, there are Mahayana sutras, there are Tantric sutras, and dzogchen sutras. ‘Sutra’ on that level means a kind of literature. Because the words can be used in many different ways there can be a kind of confusion. Sutra really means a text in which the Buddha is talking to some people and he teaches by example. It's a bit like in the Bible when Jesus teaches through a parable.

**Student:** I meant the sutric lifestyle of becoming a monk or a nun. The renunciation of form in the external lifestyle.]

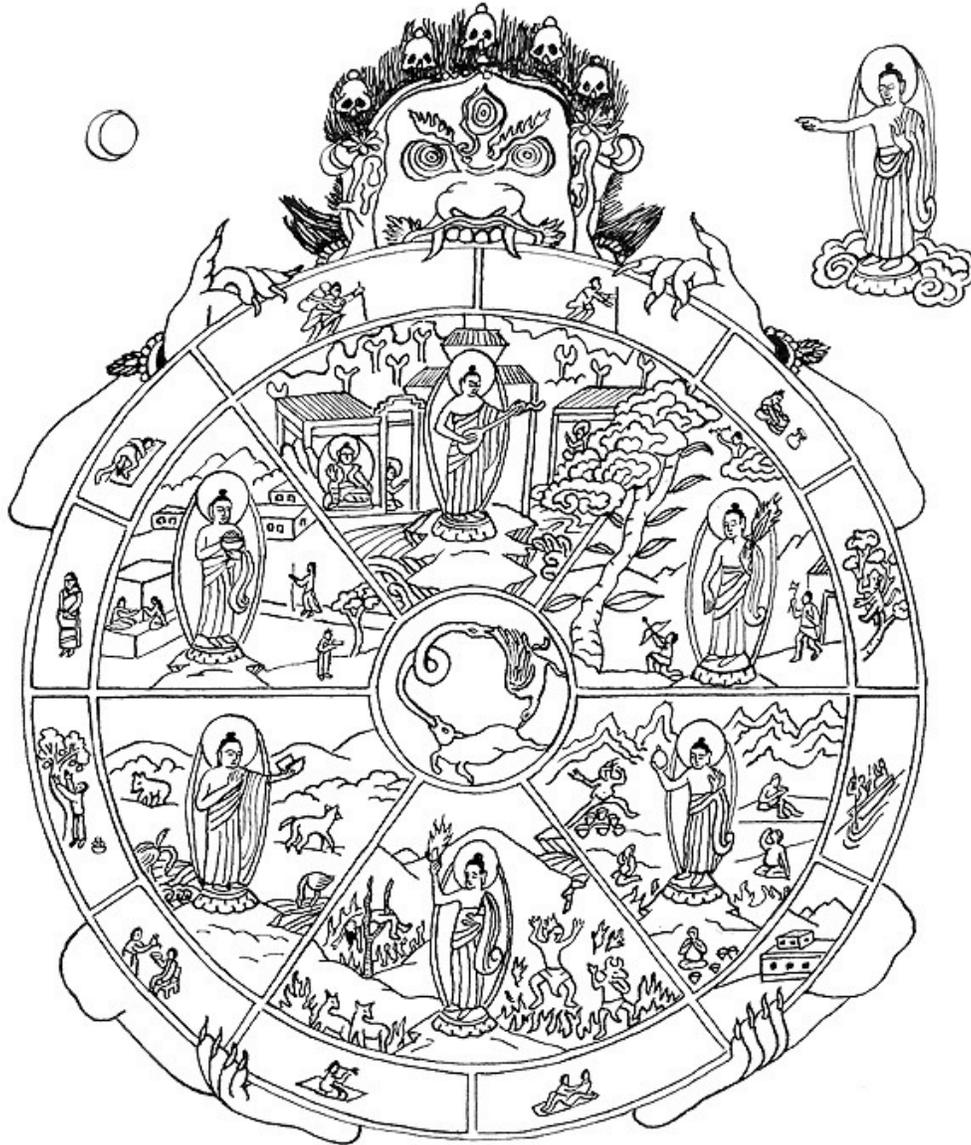
Okay, now I think I understand your use of the term. That would more often be called Hinayana or Theravadin. But if we call it sutra, to use the way you're using it, yes Mahayana Buddhism, the Heart Sutra is on the cusp, on the joining point, of that way of viewing things and the Mahayana view. And tantra is part of the Mahayana and most Tibetans would say that dzogchen is part of the Mahayana as well. Does that make sense? Is that clear?

**Student:** Why does there exist this Theravadin lifestyle if this boomerang effect exists and the thought comes back again.]

## THE HEART SUTRA

We need to be clear here. This is why many people decide not to study very much in Buddhism and only to do a simple practice. But I think it is worth the struggle to try to get a sense of the geography of this whole thing because then you can see that what is being built up is a complex conversation.

Do you have a flip chart here? Because it is easier to do it using a diagram<sup>1</sup>.



*An interpretation of the Wheel of Life © 2012 Jim Robinson.  
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<sup>1</sup> Image taken from [www.reonline.org.uk](http://www.reonline.org.uk)

## THE TIBETAN WHEEL OF LIFE

You may have seen the Tibetan wheel of life. Have you seen that? Is everybody familiar with that? In the top section. In the top middle section of the wheel there is the god realm. And it's at the top of this god realm that these states, the four levels of pure consciousness arise – the formless states. These states are still inside the wheel of the six realms. These are still places which are created out of karma, maintained by karma and then you leave them when the karma that is created and maintained them is exhausted. You leave them when the karma is used up. So many ordinary forms of both outer religious practice like making offerings to the Buddha, or giving charity to poor people, or maintaining vows of moral purity, or more inner kinds of training like doing mind-calming meditation, these create the basis for getting reborn in the higher realms. Mind calming meditations like *shiné* is found in Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Islam, even some kinds of Christian practice. They help to give from the Buddhist frame of reference, they help to lead you to a higher rebirth but they are not sufficient for getting out of *samsara*. When you get into thinking of the sutra path, some things in the sutra path will help you to get out of *samsara*, and some aspects will help you to get a better place in *samsara*.

And the same occurs in tantra when they talk of absolute and relative *siddhas* or attainments. The absolute *siddha* is enlightenment, freedom from *samsara*, and the relative ones are having more power and potency to achieve things inside *samsara*. So in the sutra path, things like becoming a monk or a nun will help to reduce the amount of disturbance that you have which will then provide a good basis for doing meditation, but then you have the different notions of what enlightenment is according to the different views. So that in the Theravadin tradition all the causes of attachment to the world are gradually burnt up. The traditional example is described as like a lamp going out. So that if you have a butter lamp or a candle it burns down and down and down until all the wax, all the substance is gone, and then it's exhausted, there is nothing more to burn. This is the traditional Theravadin idea of what happened to Buddha Shakyamuni. He stopped performing sinful action. He purified all his attachment, and so at that point there was nothing left. And he was gone.

So on from this point of view this is different from this highest level of formless consciousness because at this point there is no consciousness at all. It's just gone out. So and at that point there is no thought of what becomes of the Buddha. He is just gone. It's as if we imagine we are all here in some terrible prison here in this room and one morning – we have been here for a thousand years all living in this room – do you know there is a play by Jean-Paul Sartre called *Huis Clos* which is exactly about this – so we are here now for a thousand years all stuck in this room and then one morning we wake up – Oh, Theo's not here! Then we think “Hey, he got out – he got lucky” We don't know where he went because we can't go out but we think “He's not in this shit any more.” This is the basic kind of metaphor for the Theravadin approach. *Samsara* is suffering. We keep getting stuck in suffering because of karma and attachment. If we cut the root of

karma and attachment we will stop having the anxious grasping onto object and then we will slip free and be gone. It's a sort of emigrant story – America!! – freedom!!

If you think it is bad where you are you don't really care where you go. And you also think well if I don't leave it will get worse. It can never get better, that's the whole idea, it can never get better in samsara. "I Must get out I must get out." Whoosh! It is very important to recognise that the Heart Sutra is the point where a different view opens up. But what's really important here is the difference between that view of the Buddha's mahaparanirvana, and this highest, fourth state of consciousness. The fourth state of consciousness you come back into rebirth because the karma seed has not been finished.

**Student:** So would you say that it sounds very much like existentialism. If you happen not to believe in rebirth then it's very similar.]

No it's not a belief system. It's absolutely not just simply exchanging one idea for another the fourth state of consciousness is where you block off thoughts. There are no more thoughts but there is still a thinker. In this state the thinker and the thought both vanish. That's why it's gone. In the Theravadin view. In the Mahayana view it's different and that's what we'll come on to with the Heart Sutra. You can see that there is a rationale for it. It's a view, it's a philosophical view and it all makes sense. It is quite coherent.

**Student:** What you called this ending of all things. That you call Theravadin?

Yes

**Student:** What do you call the other one?

Which other one?

**Student:** The one with the fourth state of consciousness?

That's state is achieved through doing parts of the practice of the dharma, but not fully realising it. I mean until you're out you are still in. I mean samsara is shit, but you might have a beautiful house in Barbados with a private beach. Is that better? So living on this fourth level of consciousness – no thoughts – very peaceful, very nice. You don't have to got to work on Monday morning, very peaceful, no traffic, no tax.

**Student:** My question was, is that attributed to another way?

No I think we need to be clear about this. Any vehicle can take you there for a bit unless you get enlightened. It's the highest state in samsara but it is not out yet. the danger of it is that when you are in this blissed-out state you can't do anything. So nothing changes. It's like being in a deep freeze. If you want to get free of samsara you have to get down from that level and that's why they say in the whole of samsara a human birth is the most precious.

**Student:** But this view is possible in the Theravadin system as well?

Yes this view is taught in the Theravadin sutra. The Theravadin sutras teach this. The description of the realms occurs in the Abhidharma teachings of the Buddha himself.

And then to go back to the other point. All the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism are said to have been taught by the Shakyamuni Buddha. The idea is the Buddha taught three turnings of the wheel. He described the first one in which there is suffering, the second one we go onto in the Heart Sutra and the third one is the teaching of tantra. Buddha Shakyamuni did it all. So the first turning took place in Sarnath outside Benares. The second turning took place at the Vulture's Peak at Rajgir about one hundred kilometres north of Bodhgaya. And the third turning took place on Mount Malaya in South India which some people say is in Sri Lanka on Adam's peak in Sri Lanka. Now other people who are historical scholars will say this is a retrospective validating myth. [The myth is created afterwards] Tibetan Buddhists would believe that Buddha Shakyamuni taught everything. You would say that if you were a western person thinking of linear development of theory. Tibetan Buddhists would say, "no the Buddha taught all these things. Who else would be able to teach such wonderful things?" "So you have a different historical paradigm operating.

So the basic thing we have to remember is that if you are not in samsara you are in nirvana. There are only these two options and yet it is said there is no difference essentially between samsara and nirvana. So that in the Hinayana idea there is a bad place, bad samsara and there is another place, a good nirvana. And if you have seen the picture of the Tibetan wheel of life you'll often see this wheel is held in this clasp like that by this god of death – Yama. And usually there is a circle like this with the Buddha in it. And he points across to another empty circle showing nirvana. So whatever is in here, and maybe if somebody's got a copy of this could bring it along tomorrow and we could look at it in more detail, whatever is in here is samsara from this point of view.

Now the Buddha said there are twelve stages on the outside here which show the path of rebirth. And then on this level there are the six realms where we can be reborn and here at the top of the god–realm are these four levels of pure consciousness. And in the centre there is usually depicted three animals – a snake, a cockerel and a pig. They are chasing each other round in a circle. And the snake represents anger. The cockerel desire. And the pig stupidity. So these are the three basic poisons or affective tendencies and they run around here chasing each other round and round. And this is the energy that is really driving this wheel. So what one is trying to do is to try to get out of this situation.

In the Theravadin tradition it is as if one can get out of it by going somewhere else. It is as if there is a nirvana, a pure place, somewhere else. In the higher views, and I'll run up quickly what they are, the idea is that one doesn't leave it and go somewhere else, one finds a way of being inside this which is without suffering. In order to make this journey either from one place to another or one experience to another one needs the two

accumulations of merit and wisdom. So merit would be things like morality, generosity, bringing goodness into the world. In a sense compassion, it's the basis for compassion. And wisdom is more the practice of meditation, seeing directly into the nature of things. Understanding impermanence.

Now where one is in these six realms here depends on the karma that you have. If you're doing this mind-calming meditation and you are trying to purify yourself because you are frightened of the suffering of samsara, then basically you are getting yourself into a better situation. Because in the hell realm there is the most extreme form of subject-object difference. Where somebody is burning you with a hot iron or something. It's really "ugh!" onto you. You retreat into yourself. Horrible!! So and as this pain is coming towards you, as this man with a big pincer coming. You feel your shrinking in. So your sense of self becomes like a little tight ball. And this makes this sense of self, a separate, frightened self more and more strong. At the other extreme up here one has this state of pure open consciousness, no barriers, no walls, not even any sense of a body. But there is still.. this is still a consciousness which is concerned with objects. Because it is a consciousness which is predicated on the relief of "Oh" like if you are in a prison cell and they take you out and they torture you and they put you back and you "Phew!" at least it's stopped for the time being. It's that kind of relief. Object isn't coming onto me any more. But object hasn't gone. The torturer returns.

It's being pushed away. In calming your mind it's a kind of a retroflection. You go back into yourself. You don't go into the world of others. So it becomes solipsistic. You are sort of turned into yourself. But sooner or later object returns because you have a self. It's not free. It's still... Yeah.

**Student:** That's quite often what is misunderstood as meditative or something, a meditative state.

Yes it is a meditative state. But it's not free of samsara.

**Student:** Is this one state what is like taught in the Hinayana system or is it also for Mahayana?

It's also for Mahayana. Everybody does it.

**Student:** But as I understood it is not that one push the thoughts away, and one should observe the thoughts and still be inside the world. And to be a light that doesn't need to go outside but stay inside and still I don't know how but it's not to be...(?)

Until that state is achieved one is still in samsara. Until you're out you're in. There's no third place here. But you're quite right. The view is different. But the practice, you may be trying to do dzogchen shiné and not pushing thoughts away, but until you really get

the result of that you are still caught up with thoughts. And as long as you are caught up with the thoughts this is what you're revolving.

You see one way to think about this is here we have the nine yantras. And in the Nyingma system there are these nine different levels of practice. Down here is this basic Hinayana which is the Arhat or listening system. And the Arhat's were the close disciples of Buddha Shakyamuni and they gain a state which is very somewhere between here and nirvana. Because their desire was to end the pain. "I am hurting. I want to go someplace where there is no pain." At that point they are not concerned with what's happening to anyone else they just want to get out. They go up through these stages and make some kind of transition across. They are in state near to Buddhahood, but not quite. You then get into the politics of the hierarchy of whose enlightened and whose not.

He doesn't want to become a Bodhisattva. And the Pratyekabuddha gets enlightened as a Buddha but pratyeka means a silent or isolated, and this is a Buddha that gets enlightened but doesn't want to talk. He could speak but he doesn't want to, I don't know why. And this is a traditional classification. Then you get to the third stage which is the Bodhisattvayana or sometimes called the Paramitayana. And at this stage one is concerned now to help other beings. One says, "I don't want to get enlightened just for me. I want to do it for everyone else." So you can imagine If you are in the Bodhisattvayana, and you are doing the mind calming meditation, at a certain point you remember your obligation to other people – that you can't just go into this nice cosy state, but you have to get up and do something.

It's like having small children. You go to bed and you want to sleep. And then you hear "wah wah wah" and you have to get up and clean a bottom. So, even when you are doing the meditation that might take you up here, you are always being pulled out of it, out of these states because of your obligation to other people. Does that make sense? That the bodhisattva vow is a protection against getting lost in these spaced out states because one is always being called forth towards connection with the world?

Now I have marked out a difference here between these three as causal and these six as result. Because in these states, one's focuses of attention is on creating the causes of enlightenment primarily through developing merit and wisdom. But in these six yantras which are the tantric yantras and finally the dzogchen, they are called "the path of the result" because in these one practises as if the result had already been attained. So that means that you get an initiation into a practice, and in the initiation you are given a direct link to a deity. On the basis of that initiation you then can practise "I am Tara" or "I am Chenrezig" or "I am Padmasambhava"

**Student:** I think it is also very important to tell us also that these deities have nothing to do with the gods inside. But for people who have no idea about Tibetan Buddhism, they don't know what is Tara. And where do you situate Tara or Chenrezig?]

## USING DEITIES IN YOUR PRACTICE

These are all up here at first anyway. Later they can go down here. These are pure forms and by identifying with these pure forms you recognise your own purity. I mean it is a very kind of simple ... let's do it with Tara. [writing on board] Tara is pure. I am Tara. Therefore I am pure. Exactly the basis of all tantra. And this is why it is called the path of the result because what I want to achieve is my own purity. So I am making use of Tara to help me achieve that. All the deities that we make use of in Tibetan Buddhism are methods of practice. If one was praying to them in the sense of "you are up there, you are wonderful, you help me" only that, then you would be increasing duality. That's why in tantric meditation we always have to dissolve the deity into us or us into the deity so that this unification leads to recognition. I'll say a bit more about this tomorrow. But basically Tara is pure. We have to praise "Tara is pure!" All the positive goes up. She is very pure. This is very pure. "I am Tara! I am very pure!" And then it all comes back down again.

**Student:** How is it for example with Mahakala or the deities who are angry because if I identify it means that I am also very angry, but I didn't really understand how it should work this kind of system in Tibetan Buddhism.

I'll say more about this tomorrow afternoon when we do this kind of practice. If you ask this question again then. OK?

Because the place we actually need to come to just now is here because the Heart Sutra is on this line [points to the board]. This is where the Heart Sutra is. This below here, these two stages this is the Theravadin or Hinayana system, and above here, this is all Mahayana Buddhism. And the doorway from this system where the focus is one's own individual liberation to the path of a focus on other people's liberation as well is through the understanding of the Heart Sutra idea.

And this is very important because from the Buddhist point of view the meaning of any action depends on the intention behind the action. But we're very often used to the meaning of an action being the outcome of the action. So if one's intention here is to help myself, "I am suffering, I don't want to suffer. I want out of this!" Then one gets a result but one's intention is narrow. So the result is narrow. And in this Mahayana view which includes all of tantra, my intention is to help all sentient beings. This is a very.. if you think about it it is an amazing idea that I want to help everyone. For most of us we would feel that thought running across our lives. Usually I want to take care of me. I want to be happy. But this idea runs across that.

So it is really disrupting this path from here which is the most normal one. "I don't want to suffer..off I go..." And it's a bit similar in therapy when people come in with a problem and the desire is just to get rid of it. "I am depressed" or "I am unhappy. It is a problem and I want to solve the problem." And sometimes what is required is that the person actually goes into the problem and deepens their experience and through that their

understanding of the nature of the problem. And if they can really go into the problem, then they can become able to manage the problem as it comes back to them. That's why if one has this bodhisattva intention, the intention to help other people, one goes back again and again to suffering and through that one becomes able to manage suffering in oneself and suffering in others. One's not frightened of it any more.

Whereas everyone is primarily trying to avoid it and get away from it there is less understanding. You get the relief of the distance, but you haven't actually learnt how to manage it. In the Tibetan paintings of the deity you may have seen that they often have these rays of rainbows coloured light all around them and these rays of rainbow light represent the five wisdoms. And the five wisdoms are the purification of the five poisons. The five poisons are stupidity, anger, desire, jealousy and pride. By that purification of them what it means is really the ability to manage them It's not that they vanish forever, but one is able to have a relationship with these energies, not be overwhelmed by them, but be able to work with them. And in that way they become transformed from being limiting factors in one's life to becoming a rich potential for transformation. But the basis for being able to do this transformation is to have enough space not to be able to be caught up in them every time they arise. And the basis for that space is an understanding of emptiness. Which brings us back to the Heart Sutra which is the beginning of the possibility of this more dynamic, creative way of working where one is driven, not by fear, as in this Hinayana system, but a courageous willingness to look into the nature of what is arising.

**Question:** Can we only help people once we have got free of the wish to accumulate merit?

### **THE THREE KAYAS**

No because in the tantric system they have the idea that ... [writing on board] Have you heard of the three kayas? The Buddha is supposed to have three kayas, or three bodies or three modes of expression. Now it's said that that the dharmakaya is the result of the accumulation of wisdom. And the sambhogakaya and the nirmanakaya are the result of the accumulation of merit. The dharmakaya one does for oneself. That is to say dharmakaya is this state of complete relaxed open happiness. Nothing can ever disturb it. In this state of openness one is responsive to the needs of others. And one responds to the needs of others by manifesting the sambhoga and nirmanakaya bodies. And the ability to mobilise to manifest these is often seen as being the result of this merit. The word "sambhoga", "bhog" means "pleasure" and "sam" means "with". So it means a pleasurable body or a pleasurable way of being. And this pleasure was seen as the result of all the good things that you have accumulated. So that's a kind of formulation. That view you get in the Mahayana sutra called the Lankavatara Sutra.

They formulate the explanation in that way so that although this may seem on one level to be selfish it is actually turned into a resource for others. So that you might have two

people and both of them feel touched by the suffering of beggars. One person goes to the vegetable market at the end of the day and gets up all the old leaves from the vegetables and finds an old dustbin and cooks up a big soup and he gives this soup to different poor people. Another person joins a big German bank and learns all sorts of lying and cheating and manipulation and becomes very very wealthy, and then he opens a beautiful five–star hotel only for beggars. And this latter one is this story. But again the main issue is in the intention. Because if you do bad things with a good intention it is good. If you do good things with a bad intention it's bad in this system. Try telling that to the lawyer!

There is this story of the Buddha on a boat going on a pilgrimage to an island. Have you heard this story? There are eight hundred pilgrims on the boat and there is one man who is going to kill everyone on the boat. So in order to save all these people the Buddha kills the murderer. Now because his intention was good, basically it was a good act, but because he killed someone, he has the karma of killing. At that time he was in this human realm and he went down to hell but came back up again immediately.

That's why it's much simpler to think in terms of intention, because you can know from inside, do I want to help this person, or do I want to harm them? In Buddhism mental activity is considered to be more important than physical activity. That's why when we come into the practice of tantra and we are practising with merit, we can visualise many many offerings going up to the Buddhas and by making offerings to the Buddha this creates merit. So then rays of light come down from all the Buddhas to all sentient beings and help to purify all sentient beings.

## **THE HEART SUTRA AND COMMENTARY**

Before we start to look into the Heart Sutra, let's start with a minute of silence in which we have a sense of taking refuge in the Buddha and having an intention to study the text to help all sentient beings. This kind of refuge and Bodhicitta we can do anywhere at anytime. You can have a sense of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas above you and just a sense of you being situated beneath them and you are siting yourself in that family. And so there is a sense of all the Buddhas all the Bodhisattvas above you and then they can instantly dissolve into you and then your heart opens and you open your eyes out into the world with a sense of "Now I am present here to be available for others."

That takes only thirty seconds to do so you can do it all through the day. Whenever you get a bit lost or confused, get grounded through this sense of belonging in the dharma and then open into the world.

I am going to work from the Tibetan version of the Heart Sutra. I imagine it will pretty much correspond to the version that you may be familiar with.

The translation of the full title is *"THE HEART, OR THE ESSENCE, OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL WISDOM WHICH IS LIKE THE DIVINE FEMININE PRESENCE OF THE ESSENCE OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL*

*WISDOM.*” This is very important because it’s through this transcendental wisdom that all being enter enlightenment. When transcendental wisdom took on a symbolic or personified form, it was as a goddess known as Prajnaparamita. Because the path to enlightenment is through her womb – is to be reborn in the womb of this wisdom – she is in that sense the mother of all the Buddhas.

So the text itself begins by saying “*Thus have I heard at one time.*” And this indicates that this text has been repeated after the time of the Buddha’s death when all the sayings of the Buddha were gathered together. Buddhism was transmitted in the early stages entirely in an oral tradition. And so the close disciples of the Buddha, in particular Ananda, would repeat to their students, “Thus have I heard”, meaning “at one time I was in the presence of the Buddha and this is what I heard. So this is a traditional introductory phrase which kind of alerts the listener’s ears to the fact that what is going to be said is now the authentic true tradition.

Then, “*At this time the Buddha* (here the Buddha is referred to as Bhagavan)”. This word in Tibetan is interesting. In Tibetan it is “chom den de”. “Chom” is to defeat. To push down, to be victorious. “Den” means to possess, especially to possess good qualities. And “De” means to pass beyond, to transcend. So “chom den de” means ‘All bad things are finished. Has all good things.’ It means victorious over all the difficulties of samsara, possessing all the good qualities of nirvana and completely passed beyond any conceptual definition. So the essence of the Buddhas qualities are encapsulated in his names.

Tibetan is an agglutinative language, meaning sticky, like sticky rice. An agglutinative language is one which is composed of these morphemes which carry semantic meaning. So, a sound element is also a meaning element. So when they were translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Tibetan they were able to find syllables which represented real meaning and take the meanings of the Sanskrit words and put them into them. The Tibetan words are often much richer in meaning than the Sanskrit words, but the Sanskrit words are more familiar now to us, words like ‘Buddha’. In the way the dharma is coming into the west we have to learn all these words which don’t really mean anything to us, they are just imports. This also happened in Tibet, and it took about two hundred years to really transform and develop a Buddhist Tibetan language. As people gradually struggled and asked, “Can’t we have a language that means something that means something more directly to us?” Because we’re stuck with words like dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, nirmanakaya bi I think that gradually we’ll move in the same direction.

### **The setting – Vulture Peak**

So, there is a Buddha and he is sitting at this mountain peak which is called the Vulture Peak. You can still go to this place where the Buddha taught the Heart Sutra. It’s a very beautiful place. It’s near a town called Rajgir which is about one hundred kilometres north of Bodhgaya. There is a big hill and on the top of the hill is a new Japanese stupa which is very shiny. There is a kind of chairlift to take you up quickly. That is very nice

because if you walk up the hill then you walk past the place where the actual vulture peak is. Most tourists take the chairlift and so never go near the vulture peak. In that way it is preserved a little bit.

At this place the Buddha is surrounded by the great assembly of the sangha of monks and nuns and also by the great assembly of bodhisattvas all sitting together. In the traditional descriptions you can read that the monks and nuns are put first and the bodhisattvas are put after, that they are ‘du chig’ and ‘du shupa’, sitting at the same time in the same place. You may think that the monks and the nuns represent the Theravadin tradition and that the bodhisattvas represent a later Mahayana tradition and that there is a bit of a conflict between the two. However the text is pointing to these two groups being on the same side in the presence of the Buddha. You could see this as either being a particular historical revisionist way of minimising conflict or you could see this as a true depiction of how things actually were.

The texts describe how the Buddha “*was moving in the profound meditation of the enumeration of all dharmas which is called the profound illumination*”. “Nang wa” is a Tibetan verb and as a noun it can mean light, as a verb it can mean illumination, but it can also mean appearance as a verb, “to appear” and as a noun, “appearance”. So both means light and luminosity and appearance. Insubstantial – substantial. It’s got a nice play on meanings.

So there’s the Buddha sitting there surrounded by all these beings including the great Bodhisattva, Mahasattva Chenrezig. Mahasattva [Tibetan *sempa chenpo*] means a great being, that’s to say that the quality of his existence is notable because he embodies something of value. At that time this person was sitting there called Chenrezig, or Avalokiteshvara, ‘he’s sitting there’. The term Mahasattva means maha, great, and sattva, being; so it means somebody who embodies some realisation of truth. It’s a high-praising title. And he’s there and he is doing a meditation practice which involves fully seeing the purity of the five skandhas. So he is looking very clearly into the five skandhas and recognising that in their essential nature they are empty.

### **Chenrezig meditating on the emptiness of the Five Skandhas**

Okay, so now we have to go back to this idea of these five skandhas. Now the first is form and form is usually defined as being colour and shape. So what ever has shape and colour has form. So it could be outside form or inside form. It could be a dream would also be form in this sense. Whatever can be seen. If you remember what I said earlier, these five skandhas are the basic categories of existence. They are called like these heaps or piles, and if you imagine that all possible phenomena was a big pile of sand on the floor, you could take a little brush and sweep them into five piles and then all the confusion and the messiness of everything that could possibly arise would be in five little neat heaps.

I think we know that from modern psychotherapy a common response to the anxiety that we feel in the face of the confusion of modern life is to retreat into some kind of obsessive–compulsive behaviour. So when there is a whole lot of stuff going on and we feel overwhelmed, we check if the tap is turned off. We check if the tap's off. We check if the tap's off. We check if the tap's off. So now I have in front of me five piles. Five skandhas. and every time reality throws me something I put one down, and reality's coming very quick but I am very good at keeping my piles going. And I am not joking, this is primarily the way in which the analysis of these five skandhas is used. It reduces the complexity of the ever changing becoming of the world phenomena into five categories of existence. So if it's got form, if it's got colour. There it is. You know where you are.

The second one is feeling. Feelings are good, feelings are bad and feelings are neutral. Nothing else, very simple. Feeling good feeling bad, feeling neutral – feeling. So how do you feel today – I feel feeling. Yeah? You don't need to take it any further. All psychotherapists are out of work. But it's very simple, because whatever you feel – it's feeling. You are not concerned to work out the nuances, the differences, there's nothing interesting because it's “feeling”. So it's very important this to use the ability to name, to accurately identify a range of experience under one title, and just relax. It's feeling – stick it in the pile.

Then the third one is perception. Now perception arises through the eyes, through the five sense organs. So we see things, we hear things, we smell them, we taste them and we touch them. So this is the way in which our embodied being experiences the world. So when something is occurring and one is aware that through one's sense organs in touch with an object, that is a perception. So for example you might look at the bright light, your eyes might be tired, and so you look at the light and think ah. So you are seeing something with shape and colour, you are feeling something – “too bright” and you are also in perception. The shape and colour are out there, the perception is what's occurring here and there's a feeling tone to it as well. For most of the time we are actually caught up in a very rapid impacting of all different kinds and now we have got these three bundles we can start to unpack an experience – direct experience – into these three things.

The fourth one is association. Has somebody got a wheel of life that they could bring in tomorrow? If you could bring it in tomorrow, particularly if it is a fairly big one a detailed one with the outer circle because this term is quite difficult to get a handle on. In the outer circle of the wheel of life there are twelve stages that go round the first one is ignorance and the second one is the active form of this term, of association. Ignorance is represented in this drawing as a blind old woman. Now she is a woman because wisdom is female. OK. She's blind because it's the potential of wisdom that is blinded against itself. It doesn't see what it could be. It's old because it has been around a long time. Now the second stage which arises from this is this associating. And it's depicted as a potter with a wheel.

Because when we don't understand the world clearly, when we are in ignorance, when we are blind, it's not as if this blindness makes us paralysed so we don't move, but we act in our blindness and we create things. And this is represented by the potter taking the raw material, the earth and creating things. And particularly, out of this you know you have clay and you can form it and it goes back into clay. But the potter takes it and bakes it so that it becomes separate. So it is separating things out from the world. and you'll see particularly in Mahamudra and some dzogchen texts that they often use the metaphor of water. Particularly the idea of the wave arising out of the ocean and going back into the ocean. In the sense that the thoughts arise in the mind and collapse back into the mind. And as the thought arises from the mind it's the expression of the mind which sinking back into the mind does no damage to the mind, it doesn't help the mind, it's just the same as the mind. So here's the sense that water arises as a wave, it seems to become something different, something separate, and then it just shows the same water-ness again. Yeah? But clay is a bit different isn't it. I don't know if you have worked with clay but you can make something, and if it doesn't work you can put it down and make a mass again and redo it.

But once you make something and you think "Oh it's a beautiful pot!" Then you have to let it dry and then glaze it and then bake it and then give it to someone who can't throw it away because you are going to visit them and think "where's my beautiful pot?" Do you get the sense of that? And that is very different from the sense of the ocean and the wave. Because when you are working with clay, once your ego gets into what you've made with the clay you don't want to put it down back into the clay bin. So there's this sense that this word "association"; in Tibetan it's du che "du" means to bring together, and "che" is an active verb meaning to make. So it's bringing something into being; separating it from the mass. In Sanskrit this word is samskara. It's used in Hinduism a great deal also this term and it means a sort of basic components. The basic ways in which one brings things into being. In a sense it is the like rules of relationship between entities. The ways in which we take the raw materials of the world and construct particular forms. I mean we would probably see it as a kind of gestalt formation.

OK do you get some sense of this, what this means? And that you get a particular kind of confidence in this ability to do this. So that for example having been brought up in Germany and gone through a socialisation process here you learn social skills that you can take to other cultures. So that as a small child you didn't know how to behave socially. Gradually you learnt the rules. But it's not a set of rules that you learn, it's a particular kind of sensitivity to what other people are doing or how they are behaving.

And so this ability you can take into other situations, you have found a way of associating yourself with the world and working out what is going on. When you have to go into a new office, you know, you check out what the rules are, when people take a coffee break, how long for, all sorts of things. Whether they worry if you are late in the morning or not.

You find a way of getting into the rhythm of that place. So you get a sort of a sense of things. It is not a concrete shape, it's the style.

Then the fifth skandha is consciousness. Consciousness, there are usually considered to be six or eight kinds of consciousness. Each of the sense organs has its own consciousness and that gets a bit detailed later in the sutra. So there's eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose, tongue and body surface consciousness. So that each sense organ has one organising consciousness behind it. Then there is a central organising consciousness that organises these organisers. And that's usually called mental consciousness. So in the system of six consciousnesses that's the six. And this organising consciousness is located in the heart. The mental consciousness. Some of us may know that our heart's the worst place to put any kind of organising consciousness! So anyway then these six consciousnesses all have an organ that they operate through so we have our eyeballs, our ears, and tongue and the organ of operation for the mental consciousness is the physical heart.

And the consciousnesses each have an object. And the object of the eye consciousness is form, is what we see, colour and shape. And then for our ears it's sounds, tastes and the others. The object of mental consciousness is the data produced by the other five sense consciousnesses. So you have got six objects and six organs and six consciousnesses. And in traditional texts you'll often see a reference to that the eighteen dhatus. And dhatu means a kind of reality or a thing. So I would suggest to maybe take about 5 minutes in pairs talking together to see whether these five things make sense to you. And then we'll take up the questions to that.

**Student:** Where does the brain belong?

In traditional sense of the organisation of the body the brain is not very important. In traditional physiology – eastern physiology. Thinking is done through the heart. That's the traditional kind of idea.

**Student:** Thinking and understanding

Yes it is a completely different idea. And there are two other consciousnesses. The seventh consciousness is what's called afflicted or defiled mental consciousness. And affliction is something that limits you in some way and this afflicted mental consciousness, the afflictions mean the five poisons – again stupidity, anger, desire, jealousy and pride. It's quite interesting I think that the notion is that there is a consciousness which holds the burden of these defilements. It's as if these are separate from ordinary mental functioning. That they can run in but they can also be separated out.

**The ground, or base, consciousness**

Then the eighth form of consciousness is called the ground consciousness or the base consciousness. The base. In Sanskrit this is “alaya vijnana” and it means the consciousness which is the ground of all. So it’s the consciousness which contains the seed of all the different formations that arise in samsara. When you come into tantric texts, particularly dzogchen texts, they talk a lot about the ground. They use this word “zhi”. Zhi means ground, basis. And zhi there refers to the basic Buddha nature, the undefiled, the unchanging basis of the open aware mind of enlightenment. Now the half brother, or the half sister rather it would be of this state of open awareness is this “kun zhi nampar shepa”, this “alaya vijnana” this ground of all consciousness. Because there is the ground, the basis of enlightenment, and there is consciousness which is the beginning of samsara. And they’re like back to back. This is the eighth consciousness. It is the consciousness that is the ground of all manifestation. And the ground of the enlightened being are back to back.

Again it is a very similar idea. You could say that the ground in the dzogchen sense is the ocean and the wave – it is the ground in which nothing is ever born – the groundless ground. And then this ground of all consciousness is like some manic property developer, where you’ve got a bit of ground and this madman keeps building and building and saying, “It’s mine. I want more!!” until, “Get your house off my ground! I’m going to knock your bloody houses down! I need your ground for my house. I want a big house!”

This consciousness, this ground of all consciousness, has that attitude of needing to build. You can see how this seventh consciousness, which has these poisons running through it, would immediately come on top. This is the eighth consciousness. It is the desire to build, to get territory. It is infected by these five poisons and is operating on all the material coming through the six other consciousnesses. So this whole thing goes into this egoic territory–building, securing my landscape.

Does that make sense? These eight consciousnesses exist around the heart chakra as the eight main channels, which takes us back to the question about the brain because here it is seen that the heart is the place where these channels are moving. Sometimes you might experience this. You are walking down a street and you are looking into a shop window and immediately you get kind of interested in all this stuff. You have no need for these things and you actually don’t have any real interest in the things, but somehow you find yourself getting in there, into this thing. I think this gives us some sense of the way in which this ground of all consciousness is working because it seeks to go out and connect with things, it wants to be involved and be busy. So it has a slightly paranoid quality to it because it believes unless I have some knowledge or some ownership of things as they arise, unless I know what’s going on “Uh, I don’t know what’s going on!!”

So it’s got a kind of restless quality to it. And I think it’s what you experience when you are in meditation and feel it’s going quite well, maybe you are doing a tantric dissolving kind of meditation, and there’s a sense of openness. Then some thoughts arise and you find yourself being involved in them. Even though you don’t want to be involved in them

you find yourself getting involved in them. That's this *kun zhi nampar shepa* moving into action. It's a sort of Don Giovanni of the soul. It won't leave the girls alone. It just has to have a bit of this and a bit of that.

**Student:** This eighth consciousness sounds to me like it is in itself a problem for your functions, but I can't believe this. I mean, the nature of things are given, and they all have some function. How you describe it, it sounds as if the eighth consciousness is nothing but a problem. But should there not also be some sense in it?

The reason I described it as being back to back with this ground awareness, is that it is the other side of open awareness. It is the misunderstanding of what open awareness is. When we are open to the world then everything that appears to us is just part of the richness of what's there. And we can allow ourselves to enjoy it without appropriating it, without turning it into some self or kind or some other transaction. But this *kun zhi*, this ground of all consciousness has already been infected with the virus of a separated sense of self. So it's stuck like in a boring job in a factory, with a conveyer belt, where you have to look at this constant stream of stuff, saying into the box, into the bin, into the box, into the bin. And that's what it is doing. Self, not self, self, not self, self not self. And the *kun zhi* is doing that all the time – mine, not mine; I need, I don't need. It's that basic kind of movement.

On the other side in the *zhi* in the ground there is an openness which says that there is neither self nor non-self. There is no place to appropriate anything to, there is an open awareness in which everything arises. So it's naturally complete. And that's the level of Kuntuzangpo where everything is good. So if you want to know what the function of this thing is, its function is to fuck you up and make you suffer! And in a sense it is the ultimate enemy, because it is the point at which you identify your basic sense of being in the world separated from the world. So what one has to do at the point of going into deep meditation is to take these two things which are back to back, an open awareness, and this subject object discrimination, and turn them around and merge them together as "Kunzang Yabyum". Because this ground open awareness the pure awareness is actually in nature this dharma okay state. This is the reality of the nature of one's mind. And this ground of all consciousness is the basis for identification in the world for the movement into the world. And so it's the basis in its purified form, when these two are turned into each other, it's the basis for the other two kayas, the sambhogakaya and the nirmanakaya. That is to say it is transformed into the richness of all the ways in which one can exist and be in the world with all the richness that's in the world.

When the open pure awareness is merged with the possibility of identifying all different things, when these two come together, then what was the opening up of all the possibilities of samsara is revealed in its true form as the compassionate display which is the integration of samsara and nirvana.

It's like awareness teenage-trauma, awareness-boy and awareness-girl used to be best friends riding about on their bicycles. They were just the same. Then they get to be about twelve or thirteen and they don't like each other at all; they feel that they are very very different. Then they get to fifteen and they fall in love and they have sex together for the first time. Then the difference was the same. They had been in opposition against each other, but now they recognise that they are similar.

This is very important because this is the point at which this kind of analysis of the nature of phenomena and consciousness reveals itself as the basis for the understanding of the transformation of tantra. Otherwise we don't know why we are doing tantric meditation. Because tantric meditation is grounded in the same philosophy as all Buddhism is. It is all one family. It's not different. It's not special. It's just part of the same story. Boy and girl story, boy and girl the same, best friends, but unaware. Once upon awareness-time there was samsara and nirvana, they were best friends and they never bothered about whether they were the same or were different, they just swapped and used each others' bicycles. One day samsara said "I don't like girls any more. You're not my friend and you're not in my gang, go away." Samsara went off and did all sorts of boy's things, go into fights, broke his leg, got very unhappy. Then one evening at awareness teenage-party, under the influence of alcohol-meditation, samsara looked round and said "Wow! Nirvana, you've changed. I want to be with you for ever and ever and ever!"

**Student:** One last question. What is with babies? Do they have eighth consciousness? ]

Yes, they have it. They are born from the eighth consciousness. It's a very interesting question.

### **What happens when you die**

There has been a lot of writing and discussion in Buddhism of what happens when you die. In Theravadin system it was thought that consciousness was composed of moment by moment by moment arisings. Each moment of time is separate from each other moment of time. And each one is a separate dharma. And so when one dies, one's consciousness when leaving the body is going on in this kind of sequencing of moment by moment appearances.

But of course the five sense consciousnesses aren't working at that time because you don't have a body. So the five sense consciousness sink down into this thinking, or mentation consciousness, the sixth one. Then the sixth one dissolves into the seventh and the seventh into the eighth. Then the eighth consciousness is moving almost unconscious out of control, having all sorts of thoughts and fantasies.

There are many different possibilities at this point. This was the old idea. And at a certain point there is a manifestation of the seventh consciousness which takes one into desire and anger, which then takes one towards an object. Then out of this one comes into

relationship between the parenting state, whether it's two people having sex, two animals having sex, a chicken being sprayed or whatever it is. In some of the like in the hell realm you just suddenly arrive there in a moment of fear. Then in the god realm you arise fully formed, fully grown up, with no developmental traumas.

In the Tibetan system with the idea of the bardo – that there is a kind of transitional state between one life and the next – there developed the idea that in the bardo that one takes on a transitional bardo body and in the first part of the journey in the bardo, the illusory body that you have is roughly in the form that you have in your past life. And then as you move towards your next birth you start to take on the form that you will become. And it's a very interesting idea. So it's as if this potential consciousness which is moving towards the moment of conception, is already, through its karma, being cued into the form in which it will be born. So that it means that if you are going to be born in a human birth, at a certain point you see two people having sex, and particularly your perception hones in on their sexual organs, now you may not have been human in your past life but you are already now coming into the kind of mode of being human. So you feel some excitement seeing this sexual act and your consciousness is drawn in there. There is a mixture of the eight consciousnesses but the dominant driving force is this eighth consciousness. So in a sense the eighth consciousness is really on the cusp, on the joining point between samsara and nirvana. If it relaxes back it dissolves back into this ground openness of being and then if it goes forward it goes into this differentiation of the eighth consciousness.

If we imagine that here's all the phenomena of the world. There's all of this stuff. And there is one little hole here. And at the end of this little hole is enlightenment. Up here is enlightenment. But everything has got to get through into enlightenment at the same time. So here you are with your eight consciousnesses. And you've got to run around and pick up all of these bits, all of them without one exception, you've got to get hold of all of them and carry them through here. It's like a TV gameshow! So it really helps if you can train all these little things that are running around to jump into the five baskets. So you set your watch, "OK, one lifetime to go (whistle)" and they all come running and jump into the baskets. And then you hold onto your five baskets and run very quickly and try to get into this little hole...

### **Tantra dissolving practice**

...So this is exactly what we practise when we try to do dissolving meditation in tantra. We take all the phenomena of the world and reduce all the phenomena of the world into the one figure that we are concentrating on, whether that is Machig Labdron or Guru Rinpoche or whoever. It says pray with one-pointed faith. Your whole universe, everything in the world is dissolved into this deity. They are all contained through the focusing of your attention on this one deity. It is as if they are all condensed into the deity because they have vanished from your attention. They have ceased to exist at that time. The world is this one person. So then you are praying with one-pointed attention, a lot of faith, more and more you are concentrating your focus on this. Then the deity comes to

the top of your head and dissolves down into your heart. And you have to remember the heart is where the mind is in this system. So now my heart, my mind, the centre of my being is merged with the deity. Then my body dissolves into this point. And this point gets smaller and smaller. The whole universe is coming now into this one point. And then this point just dissolves and there is just open space. You pass through this tunnel and this is the practice of tantra. It's exactly predicated on this kind of thinking.

It's all ways of dealing with the complexity of phenomena as they arise, and bringing that complexity under control. Bringing it closer and closer to one point so that the basic dualistic structure of subject and object can be understood. We haven't grown up learning that the basic components of the world are these five skandhas. And in that sense they don't have much emotional investment for us. They are not very charged as being things that we can really use. However, if we understand the principle underpinning these five skandhas, if we are able to use categories of identification which simplify the complexity of the phenomena that we experience in our ordinary interaction, these limited range of categories, then we simplify the ways in which we are in the world. So that for example when you see an object, if you can bring to mind the sense that this is form and colour, just as if I don't know if any of you have done life drawing classes in a studio, and you've got a model but you are really just following the line. It's just you know. And so all the complexity of that person is just a line. How is the back going? So instead of there being a naked person with all sorts of sexual connotations there is simply some interesting lines. So it's in that way that by focusing the attention down into a particular thing, the world is simplified, then we are not so busy, then we don't have so many thoughts, meditation becomes easier.

So I would suggest that gradually getting used to these five skandhas can be quite helpful as a way of organising some of the sense data that we come across. Maybe a hundred years from now in the West they will be using very different basic category systems. In the Buddhist practice as it is then but at the moment we have to make use of translations of texts which are all predicated on these systems. So if we want to get benefit from using these systems we need to put as much emotional meaning, as much identification into these terms so that they actually work for us, so that they are actually part of our embodied way of experiencing the world.

[end session]

## **Prajnaparamita verse**

Before we go on with the Heart Sutra I want to teach you this little four-line verse to Prajnaparamita. There are nine syllables in each line.

*MA SAM JO ME SHE RAB PA ROL CHIN*

*MA KYE MI GAG NAM KHAI NGO WO NYID*

*SO SO RANG RIG YE SHE CHÖ YUL WA*

*DU SUM GYAL WAI YUM LA CHAG TSAL LO*

Instead of these last three syllables you can put other three syllables as an alternative ending: “Chö pa bul”, or “Kyab su chi”, or “Chag tsal lö”.

Now I’ll go through the meaning of the words. This is a prayer in four lines to Prajnaparamita, the goddess who represents the wisdom of emptiness. She represents sunyata, emptiness itself.

Back to the first syllable – “Ma” means to speak, “sam” means to think, “jo” means to express in any way, “me” is a negative. So this “me” means here negativeness in the sense of beyond, so it means beyond speech, thought and expression. Then “she rab” is usually translated as wisdom. “she” means to know and “rab” means best. So it means the best kind of knowledge, that is to say, knowledge which sees into the heart of things, and not just the names of things. Then “pa rol chin” “Pa” means further, or farther, over there, “Rol” means to go, like a movement, like the far side of something over there. “Chin” means to go. “Pa rol chin” means together, going over to the other side, which means to transcend something. In Sanskrit this is paramita. So it means the idea of transcending, going beyond your present situation over to the other side into something different.

So the first line is saying the transcendent wisdom is beyond speech, thought and expression, it’s inexpressible this wisdom.

Then the next line. “Ma” means not. Then the second word “kye” means to be born. So “ma kye” means unborn. And then it says “mi” and “mi” is another negative. Then it says “gag” and “gag” means to cease or to stop. These two terms are very important – unborn and unceasing. Unborn means because everything has this nature of emptiness, it is never substantially real. Things appear but they don’t have any self-substance. Traditionally when you look in the mirror you see an image in the mirror, something is there, you look in you see you own face, but it’s a kind of illusion. You can’t grasp it. The picture that you see of your own face looking in the mirror remains in the mirror. It can’t come into life. It’s in the mirror. It cannot be born out of the mirror. So it’s as if the mirror is like the mother’s womb and the baby never comes out. It remains unborn it always remains in the mother. And this image of the mother’s womb is used a lot in tantric Buddhism to think of emptiness. It’s the place where everything manifests but it doesn’t come out of the womb. It stays inside unborn.

And then this second phrase “mi gag” – unceasing – means appearances continue to come endlessly. Appearances are manifesting. We look around this room; we walk out on the street there is always appearance. Appearance is always occurring. But these appearances are empty appearances. They never cease, but they are not born. That is to say they have never separated out as something real in itself. This is absolutely vital. This is the essential thought in tantra. This is what form and emptiness means. Because if you think

again of the mirror. Imagine that you are looking at your face in a mirror, it's there. You can move your face around and this thing will keep changing. Something's always happening but it doesn't separate. It's ungraspable. So similarly we, in this room, if we allow ourselves just to relax and just open, there is just this room becoming itself. We are in this flow of appearance. We are just in this room in the flow of appearance. If we think I'm in here looking out of here, in out, then these things out there seem real because being in here seems real. And my body boundary, my sense organs are the limit between me in here and what is out here.

When we relax and particularly when we do this dissolving meditation, and we go out into openness, then when gradually appearance returns, there is the appearance of the room and oneself in the room. There is an unbroken flow of appearance so that there is no clear division between what is self and what is other. There is a co-appearing. This is what this "mi gag" means. Unceasing, not divided between subject and object. So these two words "ma kye mi gag" carry an enormous amount of meaning.

Then "nam khai" means sky and it's in the possessive case so it is "nam khai", not "nam kha". "Ngo wo" means nature and "nyid" is a gerund. So "ngo wo nyid" means real nature. "Nyid" in English would be something like "ness" and emphatic. "nature-ness" the nature of something. So the second line is linked to the first line. The first line is saying transcendental wisdom is beyond expression. You can't speak it, you can't think it. This second line says "and it is unborn and unceasing in nature like the sky".

A very useful exercise is on a clear day go out and look into the sky. Not looking in the direction of the sun, but allow your eye to just open and open and open to the vastness of the blue sky. At first seeing if you can find where the end of the sky is. Where does this sky begin and end? At first one is doing it in an analytic way and then relaxing and letting the eye open to the sky and through the opening of the eye, let the heart open as well so that one is just merged in the sky. By allowing yourself to merge with the sky, thought becomes very very subtle, less disturbance. You can see that as clouds, aeroplanes, birds pass in the sky – there is always something moving in the sky and often when you look into the sky you start to see little balls of light moving around in it, you have seen these little white things little tiny balls. Have you seen them? They are very nice. Like shooting stars but very very tiny, and when you open your energy you will see more of these. And these are always moving in the sky. These are like the dakini, the energy of the open dimension. So the sky is always full of movement but the movement never touches the sky. Even if an atom bomb blows up in the sky, after a while the cloud blows it all away and the sky is left.

So these are the two qualities of this understanding of awareness – it's unborn, so in that way it is like the sky, having no limit to its dimension, no top or bottom or size. And it has no front or back. It doesn't begin at the back of your head and go out. As human beings we are very much front-focused and we often have a kind of linear sort of panning view of things. But the sky is going that way as well. It's all around and the task is to

allow one's awareness to detach from an identification inside this front focused body into an expansiveness which includes the body and the environment. So it is really open. That's the second line.

Then the third line. "So so" means each individual, each thing individually. Then "rang" means my. "Rig" means awareness as in Rigpa. then "Ye she". "Ye" means primordial, from the beginning. "Che is again this verbal grouping to know, like "she rab" we had in the first line. "She rab" and "Ye she" are quite similar as ideas. the concepts of She rab and Ye she are similar but a bit different. Ye she is more like the innate capacity of awareness, the innate luminous quality of the mind. The "chö yul", "chö" means behaviour or conduct or activity. and "yul" means a country or a territory. Together "chö yul" makes up a concept like sphere of activity. And "wa" is just a syllable for the ending there. It doesn't carry any particular meaning.

What this line is saying is that this wisdom which is mentioned in the first line is the sphere of operation of the pristine awareness. Pristine awareness of one's own most pure understanding, which sees each thing just as it is. The second line is saying this is really big, vast like the sky. The third line is also saying but this Prajnaparamita, this transcendental wisdom is very precise. Not just spaced out – it sees every little thing exactly as it is. So this is important. The second line is talking about openness, being without limitation, and the third line is talking about a very precise ability to be in touch with everything just as it is.

Then we come to the fourth line. "Du sum" "Du" means time and sum means "three" The three times means the past, the present and the future. "Gyal we" means Buddhas. Gyal wa in Sanskrit is jina and it means victorious one. It is the title of a king and the Buddha Shakyamuni was seen as the great king who had conquered all sin and confusion. "Yum" means mother. The "la" means to – towards. Then "cha' tsal lo" means I bow. I offer salutation. Homage.

The second version of the ending "Chö pa bul" – "Chö pa" is an offering and "bul wa" is the verb to offer. Then the third version, "kyab su chi" means I take refuge. And the fourth one, "Chag tsal tö" chag tsal again means salutation. And "tö" means to praise. So these are four different endings that you can put on to one little prayer. The second one "chö pa bul", you can also say before you eat. You can recite this out loud if it's a good place, offering the food up to this goddess of wisdom.

## **Chöd**

And this verse is recited in most chöd practices. Does that word mean something to everyone? Chöd is a practice that was developed between India and Tibet by an Indian yogi called Padampa Sangye. And he had a student called Machig Labdron and Padampa Sangye belonged to a school called the Zhije. "Zhi-je wa" means to pacify. And the Zhije lineage emphasised teachings to pacify all the suffering in samsara. And the way you

pacify all the suffering in samsara is to put it into emptiness. So it's as if all of us all the time are pregnant and we keep feeling all the time this pressure, this little baby trying to come out. And every time it comes out we have to pop it back in again. Because when the baby comes out, samsara begins. When we are meditating and we are in this open space, if a thought arises, we notice and say, "I know you, thought. I recognise you, thought". The baby has come out. So when we feel the baby, then we pop it back in again.

The way that this is done in the chöd practice is to cut off from your body. If you cut off from your body then you have no place for physical babies to come from, no place for the real thoughts to develop from. If I'm here in my body and you're out there in your body and these things are out there, then I am real and the world is real. And if I am real then I am going to have these real babies all the time.

Now, we can't stop having the babies of thoughts since it's our nature to be very fertile. We have them all the time. So we have to shift our relationship with our body and in the chöd practice one is offering one's body so that one's body can be turned into something of value to others, so that it benefits them and one is also relieved of the burden of having to be in a flesh and blood body.

Typically one meditates that one's awareness leaves one's body and becomes a wrathful dakini. And she then because she is yourself, your consciousness is now outside, and cuts off the top of your head round here. This top of the skull, the kapala, becomes a pot which becomes very very big. Then you chop up with your dakini knife chop up the rest of your body and pop it in the pot. And you invite everyone for Sunday lunch.

What does it mean? It's a visualisation.

The important thing about the practice is that it confronts the feeling that we have that our body is very real, very precious, very important. All the tantric practices are concerned with transforming our experiences of our body. And some do it by identifying with a deity – now I am Tara now I am Padmasambhava – and so one is displacing one's ordinary sense of being embodied and becoming a deity, and trying to integrate, when one is back in one's ordinary body, the sense that one is still a deity. So this practice of chöd is a variation of that but it's trying to really undermine this sense of being in the body. And then when this everything has been eaten, then one dissolves everything and goes into this state of openness. And then if thoughts arise in which you seem to be back in your body you use this expression "Phat!!" to separate off that thought, to blast that thought away.

So in the practices of chöd this prayer to Prajnaparamita is usually said at the beginning. It's said at the beginning because this verse embodies the philosophical view of the Heart Sutra which is the basis for the practice of chöd and also the basis for the practice of all the tantras.

There is a class of literature called the Prajnaparamita literature. There is a Prajnaparamita in a hundred thousand verses. There's a Prajnaparamita in twenty thousands verses. In eight thousands verses. Then there is the Diamond Sutra. Then there is the Heart Sutra, getting a bit shorter, then there is this verse. Then there is the mantra at the end of the Heart Sutra "Tadyathā, gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā". Then finally there is the letter Aa. Then the Tibetan letter Aa is the distillation or the essence of all this literature. So which ever way one goes into this, whether one goes to the extensive form or the most basic form of Aa representing emptiness, the focus of attention is always the same.

Just as we were talking yesterday about being reborn in these six realms, and all of us have a human body, so at one time we were in our mother's womb, what we are trying to do with this understanding and this practice is to be reborn in this life. It's a kind of rebirthing. And that means that the womb that we want to be reborn from, to have our rebirth in is this womb of this great mother, Prajnaparamita. That's why it says in the fourth line "the mother of all the Buddhas of the three times". All the buddhas who have become buddhas in the past, all the people who are becoming buddhas now and those who will become buddhas in the future, which means everyone. All of these people in order to be born will have to go through the womb of the great mother. And she never gets tired.

It's a way of also giving some kind of symbolic idea for this idea of emptiness, that it is a returning home. Because when we came out from between our mothers' legs we were born separate into the world. We went out from one subject, from our mother, we went out to become separate. We were born into duality and this is how we came into suffering. A separate existence in the world but experiencing ourselves as separate from the world. And so by being born through the meditation, through this womb of the great mother, into emptiness, we are born into the unborn in which reality is always manifesting, but never separated.

Maybe we take five minutes to be talking in pairs to see if this makes sense to you and then we'll start reciting it together. If you have any thoughts or questions or anything that is unclear, or anything that is clear.

**Student:** To me this practice sounds like it could really freak out people. What I heard is that all teachers said a beginner shouldn't start with chöd because beginners can freak out.

## **Why I teach the way I do**

Yes, but the reason that I present dharma in the way that I do is because I think it is very important to strengthen the thinking function. If your thinking function is clear, and you understand what the practice is, what the principles underlying it are, then you have some

ability to identify thoughts, feelings, experiences that occur in the practice. You have a frame of reference.

Once you have that in place then it is fine to put a lot of feeling into the practice. But if you just start from the feeling, being caught up in something, you can get lost. The whole practice of tantra is very romantic. Think of young Goethe looking up in the sky and seeing dakinis flying around. If you understand the principles then you can make full use of this rich expression.

I think we have to start in a very balanced way. Attending to our behaviour, not lying, cheating, stealing or doing anything like that. Living in a very straight forward way and using that balanced existence to study and slowly do practice so that we understand and then we can relax more. There are many teachers who talk a lot about teaching with energy and transmissions like that, but I think unless you have a basis for understanding that you are likely to just be knocked off course in your life.

Over the twenty–five years or so that I have been involved in Tibetan Buddhism I have seen many people get lost. Usually what happens is an experience arises and the person cannot make sense of it and then they are not in a situation which is containing enough for them. We in the West do not have a very containing environment for the practice of the dharma. We are often having to do it on our own, without people who we feel we can trust very much for discussing our experiences. That's why I personally believe that we have to rely on the thinking function, a clear understanding of the principles as a way of stabilising ourselves. Then you have a support that is with you every day, twenty–four hours a day. Otherwise you just have intensive inputs, maybe at weekends, and you get up like this, and then you get down like that.

I used to go to a lot of things like encounter groups, and marathon groups and gestalt groups of various kinds. And my experience was always that this was very intense, and very powerful, but I had very little power to contextualise them in my ordinary life. As a result my experience was that intense experience moved into a split in myself whereby ordinary life was kind of boring and dull, and there were these wonderful occasions when you get a whole lot of energy and you get very high. It didn't actually make ordinary life feel any better.

That is why I personally prefer for myself and for other people to have just ordinary weekly therapy, a small but regular dose. It keeps a balance. If we are going to do a daily Buddhist meditation practice we need to have some supportive reason for doing the practice. Just to do it because we feel we should is not enough. We have to do it because we can see and clearly understand that there is a reason for doing it. Just like if you are encouraging children to clean their teeth it helps if you can explain why they do it. It's not a punishment but there is a particular reason. It cannot be somebody else's reason, it's not the dentist's reason. It has to be your own reason, because it's your own teeth in your own mouth.

So let's chant this together. There are nine syllables, so very often it is one–two, one–two, one–two, one–two–three, one–two, one–two, one–two, one–two–three, one–two, one–two, one–two–three, one–two, one–two, one–two–three, one–two, one–two, one–two, one–two–three.

*MA SAM JO ME SHE RAB PA ROL CHIN*

*MA KYE MI GAG NAM KHAI NGO WO NYID*

*SO SO RANG RIG YE SHE CHÖ YUL WA*

*DU SUM GYAL WAI YUM LA CHAG TSAL LO <x3>*

We can sing it quite slowly and you just join in.

That was one of the basic tunes sung in the Khandro Gegyang Chod, the sound of the dakinis' laughter, which is the most popular of the chöds at the moment. It's the chöd form of Jigme Lingpa, and adapted from it is the one that Namkhai Norbu uses. Integrate your meditation into the recitation of that. Recite it slowly and now that you know the meaning of each word, as you are saying the sound you can allow the meaning of the word to arise in your mind. Then, having used the sound to open yourself up, you contemplate on the meaning of the words. The more familiar you become with the meaning of the words, the more you can start to have the feeling of the words as they arise.

## **Heart Sutra: Sariputra questions Chenrezig**

So now we go back to the Heart Sutra. So we were at the point yesterday that the Buddha's there with all his gang and there's Chenrezig and Chenrezig's looking very clearly at the empty nature of the five skandhas. You've got to remember the scene. The Buddha is sitting in this profound meditation. Eyes not moving, nothing is moving. Here is Chenrezig. He is also doing some meditation. Now here also is Sariputra, described as ayushman (Sanskrit) or tsedan sempa (Tibetan), meaning a long-living hence good person, worthy of respect. He is also sitting there very quietly. By the power of the Buddha, in his meditation he sends a little message to Sariputra. "Say something". He doesn't have to do it by words because he is a Buddha and he can just... "Phat!" This is what the text says, I am not making this up. By the power of the Buddha, Sariputra puts a question to Chenrezig. He asks him, "*Chenrezig, those children of a good family who wish to practise according to the profound transcendental wisdom, how should they go about it? How should they train in that?*"

So then Chenrezig, this great Bodhisattva, Mahasattva, replies to this good man Sariputra, and says to him "*Sariputra, if there are sons or daughters of good families who wish to train in the profound transcendental wisdom, then they should look in this way.*" He continues – and this is now moving into the main part of the Heart Sutra – "The five

skandhas, they should really see, purely and truly, that the nature of the five skandhas are empty.”

### **Emptiness and form**

The way the grammar is here indicates that they are both naturally empty in their nature and empty. It's not as if the five skandhas were at one time real, but later somebody sucked the reality out of them so that now they are empty. Chenrezig goes on, *“Form is empty, emptiness is form. Form is not other than emptiness, and emptiness is not other than form.”* That is to say that if you have got form then there is nothing else there apart from emptiness. That is to say, when you have form, this form is absolutely at one with emptiness. When we normally look at something, we are looking at it with eyes suffused by our dualistic perception: “I am a subject in here this is an object out there.” So it appears that this is something that is solidly real, that there is something substantial out here. If I hit myself with it I feel pain so I think I know that this is real because it hurts me.

This is the kind of logic in terms of samsara once we accept the dualistic vision. But what it is saying is as if imagine that now I am looking into a mirror and I see myself, and I can see the mala which I am holding. I can see looking into the mirror that there's no real substance in my reflection and that there is no real substance in the reflection of the mala. They are there, very visible, very clearly visible but empty.

This understanding that they are there, but unborn, is what form and emptiness means here. It's here, we can see it, it's not nothing at all, but it's a presence which is nothing as such. It's not the presence of some thing it is simply presence. But I can use the womb of my dualistic consciousness to give birth to this as a real separate object. Because I am a man with two wombs. One is a womb of emptiness which gives birth to this as unborn and empty, and I have another womb which gives birth to this as real plastic beads which I got at somewhere or other but I can't remember where!

This is the division between samsara and nirvana, which mother we are going to have and which we are going to be. Is my mother emptiness, or is my mother Mrs Low in Scotland? “Hi mum.”

Oh, I have just remembered that today, March 13th, is Mother's Day! That must be an unconscious reason why I am talking about mothers. If ignorance is our mother then we are born as somebody separate and real and we are giving birth to this world of separate real objects. But when our mother is emptiness, then we also are emptiness giving birth to the display of emptiness inside emptiness. Does that make sense? Do you get a sense of what I am saying?

**Student:** I have the feeling that at this point it is still just concepts and nobody really understands what it is.

Then you have to look in the mirror and play this game in a mirror because it is very important. Who is in the mirror? By looking and seeing, something is there, but it is not anything. If you can really see, “Oh that’s what that is” then this is a metaphor which is used again “Oh, it’s like this.” Here we are here but what’s here? One has to make the jump from a conceptual understanding into a direct recognition. If you are clear about the concept it will help you in the meditation practice.

Chenrezig then says, “*And the same applies to feeling, to perception, to association, and to consciousness. They are all empty.*”

Does everybody have some idea of these five skandhas now? I am happy to go over them again if you are unclear about it.

#### **Fourth skandha: association**

**Student:** I think of my lover. That’s association. When I am sitting here meditating, trying to calm my spirit suddenly the image of my lover comes to me, so is that an association or what?

The associating is the bringing together of a thought that pulls it into being. Interest is a factor of associating. So that maybe a thought came to mind of an old lover and you are glad that you don’t know that old lover any more and there’s no interest and so that thought goes away quite quickly. But if it’s your present lover and you think “Oh I hope I’ll see him tonight or whatever” then there’s some interest and that becomes a factor that associates, that associates, that binds things together.

**Student:** Shall I put it on the fourth pile then? Association?

Yes.

**Student:** How to separate these five because if you think of the lover probably there is a feeling, and probably also a perception.

All these factors are present. So when there is an image of the lover there is a sense of “there is somebody there”. This is the result of the meeting of these five skandhas in this one place. It is a fully-formed image. So what one would be trying to do through this analysis is to unpack it. For example here is a pen. When we ask what this is, we answer that it is a pen. It’s as if pen-ness is in this. But this is made in a factory where they make pens and they have a big machine that makes red plastic. And it goes into a mould and it comes out as this bit. And they put the other bits in. And then it’s a pen.

So the pen-ness of the pen is not inherent. It doesn’t belong in it. It’s a construct which hovers over it. It’s a cultural concept. If you were a tribe in a jungle in South America you might never have seen this and if somebody gave you one of these you might put it

through a hole in your nose because you wouldn't know what to do with it. It's not inherent, the meaning, the function, is from the outside.

This is where these five skandhas make sense, because what it's trying to say is that when we see things that seem to be real in themselves, we are not seeing actually something that is there in itself, but something that is being constructed.

This view of the absence of inherent self-nature has two levels.. The first level is the absence of inherent self-nature in people. For 'people' here it means more 'beings'. In Sanskrit it's pudgala, a being. Now if you have an image of your lover or your friends or your children or whatever, and you imagine them, you are imagining somebody. That sense that there is somebody there is a construct. It is a meeting together of the five skandhas. There is a shape there is colour and form. When you were coming here today you may have walked in the street and passed some people, hopefully you didn't walk into them. You didn't walk into them because you could see that there was shape and colour. But there probably wasn't very much feeling. If you remember yesterday I said feeling is positive, negative or neutral. So it's a kind of neutral feeling that you have, and not much more is going on there. So there is a perception, "Oh there's someone in the street", and you move over. It happens very automatically. So there's the sense that there is a person there but it's not very elaborated.

Now if you think of your lover or someone that you're close to, then there is form or colour, plus some intense feeling, maybe love, maybe hatred. Your perception is probably a bit more acute, you probably look at them a bit more closely. Alternatively if you think you know the person very well you may have a very complacent eye. You may not see them at all because they are so familiar. So you may have already developed a fairly habitual relationship in which the presence of the other person is existing mainly as an idea in you head rather than in the perception. Remember when you first met your lover and were really interested in them your eyes are very alert? You are looking and listening and touching, "Wow." You really have the sense of the presence and gradually the energy drops and they become more an idea.

So in terms of the associating factors, you are walking along the pavement this morning and you pass someone. Part of the associating factor is as sense of Sunday morning, it's light, it's a public street, there are other people. So there's a sense of safety. Imagine it's four o'clock in the morning. You are walking along the same street and someone's coming towards you. There's a different factor of association going on. The perception's about the same. So these factors of association are called into context by our own internal state, our mood, our health, or whatever. They are called into play, They come forth, they arise. Also what you perceive in the other person. And by memories and associations.

**Student:** So this is very much to do with concepts

With concepts and with context – how you make sense of it.

Like say for example when you go home, usually you put your key in the door and you go in without thinking. One time you open the door you go in and you think, “Oh my God, somebody’s robbed my flat!” Then you find every time you come in you open the door you look around. Because a new kind of association has arisen in your mind. A new kind of gestalt that gets imposed on this situation. And similarly in psychotherapy a lot of the work that we do is to try to change the factors of association.

**Student:** Could this also be called conditioning?

Yes it’s a kind of conditioning.

**Student:** Is it the function which makes the child learn through experience?

Yes, in English we say, “once bitten twice shy”. Now an association has come in. Even before the dog bites you – “I don’t like dogs”.

Of course, there is another level to this that we have from our karma. We haven’t just come into this life and developed our pattern of the skandhas from this life experience, but also informed from past life experience. Shall we have a tea break now and analyse every action in terms of the five skandhas?

**Student:** How do I deal with the normal thoughts during meditation. For instance have I switched off the water tap? Where do I put it in this system?

What arises in the first moment is consciousness. So what you can say is ‘consciousness’. And then what you have there is maybe a feeling tone in it. You might be anxious. It might just be a thought that goes by “Oh God, I don’t think I turned it off.” So then you might also have a perception, you might see yourself back in your kitchen at home, or there might be a feeling.

**Student:** not like fear, anger

That would be a negative feeling.

**Student:** So you would say bad]

You would just label it “negative feeling” and so you would not get caught up in it, you would just label it. You know it’s a bit like a developmental process when you see with small children, when they start to learn language, because they get more confidence because they can make discriminations. So they are getting more confidence by having more words to open up more precise differentiation. We’re reversing the process here by reducing the categories and it’s done on the basis of a doctrinal emphasis or stamp that the Buddha said that the Buddha said “these are the five basic categories of existence.”

**Student:** Have I got it right? The five skandhas work together and they build the construct and that's what we call reality, and this is a cultural idea, but in reality it's not there at all.

It is there, but it's not there – substantially real. It's form and emptiness.

Let's have a fifty minute break now and then come back and do some practice.

[Break]

Right, we're doing wonderfully well here.

Chenrezig has been saying that all of these five skandhas, each one, is emptiness and that emptiness is not different from each of them.

And then he says, "*Sariputra, it is in this way that all phenomena, all dharmas are empty.*" So if you remember from yesterday "All dharmas" means everything that is possible, every-thing, each different thing. All of these are sorted into these five heaps, so that if you prove that each of the five heaps is empty, you therefore prove that everything is empty.

In the Hinayana or in the Theravadin tradition, by understanding that all phenomena are actually a patterning of the five skandhas, one is able to deconstruct the notion of a person. So that instead of seeing, "this is my friend, this is my enemy", one starts to perceive that "this is a form created out of the meeting together of these five skandhas".

Say you were working in something like intuitive massage or shiatsu, where you are thinking about the balancing of the five elements in the body, then when you are in touch with the state of the person's body you are thinking of how these elements are moving. You are not thinking, "here is a person"; you are experiencing a field of movement of these five elements.

Taking up this view of the five skandhas, one becomes freed from the idea that there are real people existing in the world. Dharma as genocide. Everybody is wiped out. Not one survivor. "If even one person survives, my plan for universal domination will not be successful. All must go into emptiness." This is this idea. For as long as we perceive one single person, subject-object comes back very strongly. So, when I am starting to perceive a person what I have to do is to recognise this I am now being conscious of the operation of this fourth factor of assemblage or construction which is creating a person out of my sense-perception, my feeling and the form that seems to be there.

One of my teachers told me that the job of the guru is like two brothers sleeping in one bed. One is having a nightmare and the other is awake. And the one who is awake is trying to wake up the person who is having a nightmare. But in the nightmare they keep

including the one who is awake, imagining that they are part of the dream. So we have to try to crack through our absorption in, “there are real people, everything is real”.

This is why we have to use this idea of these five skandhas as a tool, as a method for dislocating, for disrupting our intoxication in the dream, that things really exist as separate entities. These five skandhas are not a mantra, they are not just something to recite. One actually has to try to use them, to make use of them to analyse things. “Oh now I am creating something.” And we can do that in ourselves but also in observing other people.

You often see that with children. They go to school and in the school there can be other children interested in something and they come home and they are also very interested in these things. Or they might decide that they can no longer eat this kind of food because their best friend is not eating that food. So you can see the way this factor of association that constructs things is operating in them.

Things like that. Maybe you know two people in a relationship and one of them has an affair, and the person who is not having an affair finds out and feels betrayed. The factors of association that were in place before regarding their partner change into different ones. Now they are suspicious, watchful whereas before they were trusting and open. The consciousness that they had before of their partner was maybe fairly relaxed or open, it wasn't focused. Now every time the phone rings and the partner on the phone, they're thinking “Is that their lover they are talking to?” The ear becomes huge. We can use such situations in our ordinary life to see how people are construing, creating their existences.

Another thing that we are influenced by the weather. In the wintertime you can wear a baggy sweater then summertime comes and most people, because it's hot, wear more exposing clothes. Anxious feelings about the shape of one's body rise more to the surface. It's a regular feature in women's magazines around this time of the year; they have exercises preparing for the beach. So you can see how the factors of association pull different parts of our experience, form takes on a different meaning in a different context. So you can see how easy it is to fall into, “Does my bum look big in this? Oh, no! I should look like her” Then anxiety, worry and different kinds of activity follow. Whereas if one stays relaxed and says, “This is shape and colour”, and what shape and what colour and the feeling is neutral! The perception is “I don't want to see!” The association is “Nothing to do with me. I live up here!” Consciousness is thinking of something else. In that way you can save yourself a lot of anxiety.

I think we can learn to apply this to all sorts of things. The kinds of choices we make, how we are influenced by the world.

## **Things are without signification, says Chenrezig**

Then again Chenrezig is speaking. Chenrezig is the Tibetan name, Avalokiteshvara is the Sanskrit name, in English it would be “Glancing Eye”. Chenrezig said before to Sariputra, “In this way all phenomena are empty.” Now he continues, “*They are without signification.*” That is to say they cannot be signified.

Signified means “named”, they don’t have qualities which can be identified. In Sanskrit it is *lakshan*. They don’t have these qualities which you can get a handle on. For example, here is a pen. We can say it’s red, it’s plastic, not the worst quality, not the best quality, look at the shape, it’s made by Parker. We can put all sorts of things onto it. So in that way we load this object with all of these projects or assumptions. What Chenrezig is saying is that, in itself, this doesn’t have these things. They are imposed, put onto it. Phenomena are unborn and they are unceasing. And we have already talked about that.; how are without stain, free of defilement, not marked in any way in the sense that they do not have anything missing. They don’t diminish and neither do they increase.

So, we have this pen. Now I can use it for a while and the ink will run out and it will get scratched and broken. On the level of it being a pen I have assumptions about what a pen is and what it should do. I’m on the telephone and I reach for the pen since I want to write down the message. But it does not write, so I throw it away in a bad mood now. Because it is no longer a pen. I can’t use it. It’s worthless, useless. So there’s a loss. I thought it was a pen, I thought I could write with it, I thought I knew what it was and the bloody thing doesn’t work! So this object can no longer sustain the assumptions I am projecting onto it. It has betrayed me and now I feel angry. Like when the car won’t start.

This is what this means. We create something in the world and then put all of these qualities onto it, and then we come to feel that somehow the things doesn’t live up to it. But what Chenrezig is saying is that in its real nature, whatever is there has never been added to by the qualities and projections I have put onto it and is not depleted by the changes that go on in it. Because it is not in itself a pen.

However, as long as we live in this world of assumptions it is important to know what things are and what they should do, but it gets us caught up in hopes and fears. So we relax into the openness that everything is simply in the mirror, in the womb, that everything is the unborn display of emptiness. Then there is a lot of relaxation for us because we no longer have to put these names onto things, we just allow things to be as they are.

Next Chenrezig says, “*Sariputra, if you look in this way emptiness is without form, it’s without feeling, perception, constructing, association and without consciousness. It’s without eye, without ear, without nose, without tongue, without body and without mentation, without this thinking function. It’s without form, without sound, without smell, without taste, without touch. It is without dharmas.*”

### **Chenrezig speaks of the eighteen dhatus. More on the Wheel of Life**

You remember yesterday I said that there were the six objects, six organs and six consciousnesses and that these are referred to as the eighteen dhatus? Chenrezig speaks next referring to these about the eighteen dhatus but using a different system of clarification.

He says, *“From being without the dhatu of the eye...”* He’s making a list now of eighteen in a row, and at the very bottom one, because he starts with the eye consciousness, *“From being without an eyeball until being without the dhatu of mentation and further up to the mentation consciousness, emptiness is without any of these.”* It’s a very condensed sentence and quite difficult to understand. Basically it means all the sense objects, all the sense organs and all the sense consciousnesses, all of these are just emptiness. *“All these phenomena are without ignorance and they are without the exhaustion or the cessation of ignorance. And moving from these, they are without old age, sickness and death and the cessation of old age, sickness and death.”*

What this refers to is in this wheel of life,

THE HEART SUTRA



<http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/ReIn260/Images260/Wheel%20of%20life.jpg>

If you look at the outer circle, there are twelve stages. These stages are called the twelve nidanas. It means the twelve linked stages. It is a process of what is called dependent origination and the link between each stage is summed up in the phrase, "On the basis of

this, that arises...“ Each stage becomes the basis for the next one to arise. A bit like these Russian dolls which fit into each other. So the first stage is **ignorance**, that’s like the big doll. And you open it up and out comes **association**. And you open association and out comes **consciousness**. Consciousness is shown as some monkeys playing in a tree. Then comes **name and form** which is a man in a boat. Then comes the **consciousness and objects** – subject and object – which is shown as a house, usually a house with six windows, because we live in a body with little windows we look out of. Then comes touch or **contact**, which is shown here by a couple kissing. Then after kissing you get **feeling**. Which is shown by having an arrow in your eye. Broken hearts come quickly. Then comes **craving**. After having had your heart broken by this one, you go and look for another one to do it again. And this is shown by some people sitting drinking alcohol – “Have another!” And then that leads to **taking**, because you get into the habit of having a lot so you need more which is shown here by a man reaching up to pull some fruit down from a tree. And in that way we reach forward in our lives to pull the fruit to us, the karmic fruit, that we have already planted in the tree of our past action, we reach forward to pull it into our lives. That then leads to **becoming** in which things are progressing and that’s shown by two people having sex. Which then leads to the next lifetime which leads to **birth**. And then if you’re born you get old and die and that leads to old age, sickness and death and it’s shown by an old man and then a corpse. So this is the cycle of rebirth.

When Chenrezig says “*it’s without ignorance and without the ending of ignorance...*” up to “*...being without old age and death and the ending of old age and death.*” this means both taking this twelve stage cycle in its positive way and in its negative unpacking way. And “in that way it is still without (and he’s still referring to all dharmas) suffering. And without the cause of suffering and without the cessation of suffering and without the path to the cessation of suffering.” And so he is saying that all phenomenas are free of the four truths which is to say that in their real nature, in this unborn nature, they are free of the causes of the four truths of suffering.

He says, “*They are without pristine cognition. They are without wisdom. They are without gain. And they are without the absence of gain.*” This means that all phenomena, don’t need to have wisdom added to them. It’s not as if when the Buddha came into the world and started to teach the dharma he was adding this special new ingredient like a new washing powder, but rather he revealed that everything is perfect in itself. Because it’s unborn how could it be impure? Because it’s unborn how could it be improved?

For example if you look at your face in the mirror, and you want to put on some makeup to make your face look different, you have to put the makeup on your own face, you can’t put it on the reflection in the mirror. If you put the lipstick on the mirror, and then you moved your head, it wouldn’t be on your mouth any more. Like that, all phenomena are free of wisdom, free of gaining and free of not gaining.

These last statements are an important underpinning of the Nyingmapa view. Do you remember yesterday we spoke of the form used to represent the original buddhanature

and called Kuntuzangpo, 'always good'. The Heart Sutra here is saying clearly what is the basis for the Nyingmapa dzogchen view that everything is pure from the very beginning, *kadag*. So it is important to understand that the dzogchen or tantra views are not different from the mahayana view of the Heart Sutra; the view is exactly the same view as is here.

The difference lies in which method you use. The method that is usually appropriate to this kind of text is an analytical, philosophical view where you struggle with these concepts and try to understand them intellectually. In tantra the methods used include visualisation, movement and sound. Dzogchen also uses different kinds of exercises.

So we have now covered the heart of the Heart Sutra and we can take a break now.

**Student:** I can't find any reference in the sutra to emptiness being good.

The connection is that because everything is empty, it is neither good nor bad. Because it's neither good nor bad you don't need to worry if it is good or bad; it just is what it is. That is the level of good. When we say, "Samantabhadra is always good" it doesn't mean always good as opposed to bad, since that would be to reintroduce a dualistic notion. 'Good' on this level means 'complete' like the word 'dzogchen' which means 'a great completion'. It's just perfect the way it is. There's nothing to be added to it or taken from it. It's just... OK.

[Break]

## **Advice on how apply the dharma after the retreat**

Perhaps one thing I can offer is, from looking at texts over many years and having done different kinds of practice, as well as reading and thinking about western theories of mind, is to make some space in which we can think about these things together.

In order to do that I think it helps if people also do some studying in their own time. Then one can have more focussed questions and answer sessions, and a more thoughtful way of taking up the dharma. Tibetan life was not particularly reflective. But for us to live in the West with all sorts of choices and possibilities we often have to really think about our lives and think about what we want to do. Having some tools to do this is really useful.

One thing that I would suggest is that, if people are interested, you meet in small study groups and read together chapters from some of the traditional dharma books. Something like Gampopa's "*DUAL ORNAMENT OF LIBERATION*" in which he gives a very clear account of the ten bodhisattva stages, what is refuge, what is bodhicitta, many of the basic concepts of the dharma are spelled out according to the traditional sources. Often if you try to read a book like that on your own it can just become a headache if the language is heavy and dense. Meeting and discussing a text may be more rewarding.

Maybe for people who would like to do that we can talk about it after the teabreak. My thought would be to meet something like once every three weeks. With a group of maybe four people and each person takes it in turn to present a chapter, to introduce it, but everyone will have read the chapter. Through that different people can have different ideas and with the meeting of the ideas and trying to relate what you study to your ordinary life you can see if there's a way through that and support each other. From time to time you can invite someone like me to come and go over the sorts of things you have been doing and take any questions and clarify them.

In general, in the practice of the dharma faith is very important, yet in our time scepticism is also very important. One needs the ability to have both an open heart and faith, whilst at the same time keeping your head clear and able to think about the implications of what you're involved in.

Buddhism is not a cult; it's a range of teachings or interventions through which people can understand more about themselves. But you can't understand yourself by only trying to be what you think somebody else wants you to be. I think that the reason that people get drawn towards cults is because it takes away anxiety. You can rely on the group to do your thinking for you and then you don't need to have to worry because you say, "The group must be right, I am a member of the group. therefore I am OK." Some people *do* maintain that kind of dharma practice! In fact a lot of dharma practice in Tibet operated on those terms.

### **A story from C R Lama**

C.R. Lama told me that once when he was young and travelling in Tibet, he came at night to a small monastery. He and his companions were very dirty from the journey, and they were wearing the kind of outer robes that laypeople often wear. They went into the main hall of the small monastery and a monk came up to them thinking they were village people and said, "Oh, it's very nice that you to come to visit our beautiful monastery." And C.R. Lama said, "Yes, it looks very wonderful. Can you tell me about it?" And the monks said, "This is the place where you come to make offerings to the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha." And he pointed to the big statue in the middle and said, "This is the Buddha" and he pointed to some books on a high shelf, not books that anyone was reading, and said, "This is the dharma" and then he pointed at himself and said, "And I am the sangha." In that way people don't learn anything. Of course as a monk he was part of the sangha, but he was so comfortable, so "in his home" that nothing was changing for him.

## **How the dharma helps us change**

For the practice of the dharma to help us to change, then it has to make us feel upset in some way. When we study the philosophy we might feel stupid and we shouldn't feel ashamed of this. This may be our state in relationship to these difficult ideas. These dharma ideas have been developed for many many years by the greatest thinkers in many different cultures. Not only are they intellectually challenging, but they also carry with them the depth of the intensive meditation practice that many yogis have carried. If we can't understand them at first then we shouldn't be down-hearted, we should be full of respect that there may be some meaning there and go back to them again and again. We should try to understand them, not by wiping out our own thoughts, but by using our own thoughts and understanding to engage with the texts. If we accept the traditional notion then we have been born again and again in samsara many times, and in that time we have built up many powerful karmic habits, then yes, to get free of the power of these habits is very difficult.

If giving up cigarettes is difficult imagine what giving up attachment to the sense of things existing in truth is. When you take a cigarette out of the packet you can see it. You can have a choice to smoke it or not to smoke it. But most of the time when a thought arises in our mind we don't have any choice. We don't even recognise that there is a choice. We are just right after it. So first of all we have to recognise how we are caught up in this habitual response. Then we have to start examining what other options are available. Then we have to develop the force of clear awareness and attention that will give us the willpower to effect a change. And then we have to sustain this as our ongoing attitude towards the future. If you give up smoking and you don't buy any more cigarettes, and you let your friends know that you are not smoking, then the temptation recedes gradually because you start to imagine having a life without cigarettes. But as we have been looking this weekend it is very difficult to imagine a life without thoughts. It's not about giving up thoughts, rather it is about changing our relationship to them.

Some of you may have had the experience of being in a relationship which became difficult. Maybe you started to feel, "I am just too close to this person. When I first met them we were just friends and that was just fine. Then we got into this sexual thing and we started living together and it's all too much. I can't cope. I need a bit of space. If I can have some space then I think we can go back to being friends again" That, I think, is often quite difficult. Although you may feel that you have to let go of that person, get them out of your life because there are unresolved issues between you that you can't really work through, yet every time you see them you want to have a drink or a chat or whatever, and somehow you get caught up in the same old stuff.

It is like that when you try to change your relationship with your thoughts. You can't just dump your thoughts and say, "I'm never going to see them again. They are just trouble. I've had enough of these thoughts!" You've got to continue living with these things

which can disturb you. Renegotiating this new relationship requires maturity because every now and then the thoughts, exactly as you know they will, play nasty.

Your thoughts have been living with you for a long time and they know exactly where your weak points are. They can press all your buttons. So they set you up very nicely. They give you two or three days good meditation and then just when you think it's getting better, puff!

That's why it would be my suggestion that studying the traditional texts and giving yourself more resources, more information, and more options, the basis for different choices is very, very useful.

[break]

## Heart Sutra Mantra

Chenrezig goes on to say to Sariputra *"It is because bodhisattvas gain nothing..."* and also *"It is because bodhisattvas have nothing to get..."* – he is making both meanings – *"...that they are able to rely on the transcendental wisdom. And because of this their minds are without obscuration and without a kind of false clarity. Because of this they go beyond all faults and gain enlightenment, gain nirvana. All the Buddhas of the three times rely on this transcendental wisdom in order to gain the unsurpassed, supreme enlightenment of Buddhahood.*

*Because this is the way things are, the transcendental wisdom has a mantra."*

By this it means that the essence of what has been said before can be brought together in the form of a mantra. *"This is the precious mantra. It's the unsurpassed mantra. It's a mantra which has nothing similar to it. It is the mantra which completely pacifies all suffering. You should know that this is the undecitful real truth. This is the mantra of transcendental wisdom. And this is what you say:*

*TADHYATA, GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAM GATE, BODHI SVAHA.*

"Tadhyata" means "like this", "in this way". It's an opening phrase that you get in the early mantras.

So this mantra is: This is it, this is how it is. Gone, gone, Completely gone. Gone beyond. Complete enlightenment. This is how it is.

And what is gone and what is going where? What is gone is a reliance on things being separate objects. So the first "gate" means all objects are gone into emptiness. The second gone is subject gone. Because if you are waiting for your friends and you are looking at your watch and you think "Two hours and they never turned up. Why should I wait any longer?" So all the thoughts are gone, they are not coming back. (whistle) It's boring isn't

it? So I am not going to hang around. I'm going as well. Object gone, subject gone. It's all gone. Over. "I don't want to see you again I don't want to see me again. Puff," gone. And that's the point at which everything goes into the one point of emptiness.

Chenrezig continues, "*Sariputra, the great bodhisattvas have trained in just this method of transcendental wisdom.*" That is the end of Chenrezig speaking.

The sutra then says, "*And then the Buddha awoke from his meditation. Got up from his meditation.*" Chenrezig had to do all the work and the Buddha just sits there very nice! But he is not ungrateful because the Buddha tells him, '*Bodhisattva, great being, Chenrezig. Well done. Excellent, excellent. People of good families that's exactly it. Because that's it, that's the way you should train. You should develop yourself according to this profound transcendental wisdom. And if you do this then all the Buddhas, (and here he uses this other word for Buddhas, Tathāgata) all the Tathāgatas will rejoice at the merit that you have developed by this training.*' The Buddha said this directly and then this good person Sariputra and then the great being Bodhisattva Chenrezig and everyone else, all the other circles of the people who were there, all the gods, all the humans and all the asuras – the jealous gods – and all the gandharvas – angelic spirits who float in the air and play music– together and everyone in the world was happy and rejoiced. And really praised the words of the Buddha."

And that is the end of the Heart Sutra.

## **HOW THE SUTRA AROSE**

The structure of the sutra is interesting as well because of how it all arises from the Buddha. The instigation comes from the Buddha who, in his meditation, goes to Sariputra prompting him to ask a question of Chenrezig, who is in his meditation as he replies to the question. The Buddha stimulates Sariputra to ask a question of Chenrezig. So the teaching that then arises, arises out of the state of meditation. This indicates to us very clearly this is not some kind of mental activity that gives rise to this statement of the Heart Sutra, but that the words are a direct revealing of the profound understanding of Chenrezig from his meditation.

## **BODHISATTVA DEITIES**

I'll say a little bit about deities and their background and then we can do some practice together.

If everything has the nature of emptiness, everything that arises can be the door that we go through because everything is potentially, when we meet it in its form, a door into emptiness. We can recognise "Oh this is not form, this is emptiness." That flip can occur through any arising and there are many stories of people, more particularly in the Ch'an and Zen traditions of people who are, for example, watching the moon rising, or hearing

some wood being chopped, or listening to the river, or a bird singing, and suddenly there is a click and they see through that gap.

In tantra one makes use of these deities as intentional devices to give you the moment of recognition of the nature of form and emptiness.

On war memorials in Britain it is very common to carve the statement “No greater love hath any man than to lay down his life for a friend.” Think of it, the bodhisattva lays down his life endlessly for everyone by becoming a meditation deity. With almost all the deities, all these Tibetan divine forms, whether peaceful, wrathful or whatever, we can read the story of how they came into being. It’s usually a story like, “Once upon a time there was a good person who was very troubled by.... and after many difficulties and years of practising became very very good.... and then suddenly become a god.” By becoming a divine form they let go of their individual personhood but they continue to manifest.

Therefore the form that manifests from this state of enlightenment, the form of Chenrezig, or Tara or Padmasambhava or Mahakala, or Vajrakilaya, or any of the deities, peaceful or wrathful, is an empty expression of the open wisdom of enlightenment. Out of this open state of awareness these forms arise as a manifestation of their compassion.

So it’s as if we are all crazy teenagers. It’s three o’clock in the morning and we’ve been at a party and we are a bit drunk and we can’t get home. And we dial the number “Hello Dad! I’m fifty kilometres away and I have no money. Can you come and pick me up? I don’t think you were sleeping, were you?” And papa replies, “No, I never sleep, I am a bodhisattva and I am coming for you now.” And the car comes and takes you home. That really is how it works because they take you back to your true home. Here we are wandering lost, crazy, drunk, stupid in samsara, and we get an initiation, and we get a mantra – telephone number – and we keep dialling it.

The thing about all these forms is that they are this expression and they manifest in order to be made use of. The angry forms, what we call the wrathful forms, are not themselves angry, just as the peaceful forms are not in themselves peaceful. It is often said that Chenrezig is the bodhisattva of compassion, but every bodhisattva is compassion. Vajrakilaya is not less compassionate than Chenrezig. All have the same basic nature. The form that they show is for the specific task that they take on.

So that what is important for us is to find the particular deities that we have some connection with, that we feel some connection with so that we will be able to make use of them to go home. If you have ambivalent feelings towards a deity then that will get in the way of your being able to merge totally in the deity and have the deity merge in you and use that as a means to dissolve. It’s not that all of these forms are enlightened therefore you should be able to make use of any of the forms. Just because somebody is physically attractive doesn’t mean that you want to have sex with them. There usually has to be

some particular kind of connectedness that draws you into a desire to be involved with that person. In theory, if you have sexual organs you could probably have sex with all attractive people, but that's not how it works in practice. Similarly with these deities, in principle they can all help you, but the issue is to find the ones that you actually get connected with, because one needs to have some degree of intensity and passion in order to make these things work – but an intensity and passion that is grounded in an understanding of the principles of the structure of the practice.

Regarding the wrathful deities, most of us in our education are told that it's not allowed to be angry, that people will not like us if we are angry and that we will get into trouble. So we try to hide or repress our anger. It's as if we live in a dilemma of: 'Either I bottle up all my anger and try to be a nice person but have this deep frustration because I am at odds with myself, or, I express my anger but I become so wild and terrible that I lose my connection with other people and I find myself unwanted and alone'.

These wrathful deities are ways of indicating that anger can be both released and contained at the same time. In that way they become a channel so that if we find we have a lot of repressed anger and that we're frightened of it bursting out, we can make use of this wrathful deity. By being there fully with all the flames and everything and doing the mantra one is both radiating this anger, and keeping it contained because it is integrated now in this mirror-like state of emptiness.

## **MEDITATION AND DEDICATION AT THE END**

The essence of all tantra, as I was trying to say yesterday, is to bring all the phenomena of the world and concentrate them, as if they were present in this one deity form in front of us. To have one-pointed attention on one focused object.

Then we bring this point, this object to the top of our head, down into our heart. Remember we were talking about how our heart is the centre of our subjectivity? So, we have an object outside coming to the top of our head, and then this object is sinking down into our hearts. We really focus on this object that we've been thinking about, and praying to come closer and closer, and dissolving object into subject. Then our own body which has already become filled with light dissolves down into this point. We go into that point and just dissolve straight through it into openness.

So, visualise in front of you whatever deity you would like to visualise. Then we recite together "Om Aa Hung." which is the essence of all mantras. "Om" represents the nirmanakaya or the Buddha's body. "Aa" is the sambhogakaya or the Buddha's speech. And "Hung" is the dharmakaya or the Buddha's mind.

If you prefer, you can visualise a translucent ball of light and then watch this ball of light, or the deity there in the sky in front of you, in the midst of a clear blue sky; this is the sole focus of your attention.

## THE HEART SUTRA

Then we recite “Om Aa Hung...” several times. As we are reciting “Om Aa Hung” we are imagining that rays of white light are coming and merging in our forehead, purifying all the sins of our body, and filling our body with white light. Then imagine that rays of red light are coming in and dissolving into our throat, and filling our bodies with red light and purifying our speech. Then rays of blue light come and merge into our heart, purifying all the sins of the mind and filling our body with blue light.

When we stop reciting Om Aa Hung, this deity, or ball of light, comes to the top of our head and dissolves down into our heart in the way I have described. Then we’ll stay in that open state for a while and then just gently allow our attention to return to the room.

Okay, so just having that presence in front of you, in the clear blue sky...

[Recitation of Dedication of Merit Prayer]

**End.**