

The Healing Power of Emptiness

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At the end are translations of **The Heart Sutra** and **The Jewel Cloud Sutra**

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Buddhism offers many paths to awakening. Awakening from what? From the delusion that we are separate individuals, finite entities living in a world of finite entities. Why would we bother to do this? Because it is the only way to free ourselves from the sufferings of birth, old-age, sickness and death. Why is this? Because our birth as a seemingly separate person arises due to not being present with the actual ground of our being. What stops us being present in this way? We are currently, moment by moment, both ignoring how life truly is and simultaneously imagining the deluded visions that we take our lives to be.

What can be done about this? We can learn to see how we deceive ourselves and start to let the light of truth illuminate our actual situation. This is like waking up from a dream and recognising that we were dreaming.

How can we start to do this? By examining the misleading beliefs that we currently employ to make sense of what is occurring. What then? By letting false beliefs dissolve there is space to let the simple truth of phenomena reveal itself. What will we see then? As the veil of interpretive concepts thins, all that we experience becomes fresh and bright. Our senses become unmediated and our dulling consciousness unpeels to reveal pristine awareness. What is this awareness aware of? All the seemingly truly existing things that we rely on have no real existence. They are empty of self-existence, of personal essence. Their own identity is an illusion like a mirage. They are actually the display of the radiance of emptiness. Awareness is empty of a defining self as is all that it reveals.

Emptiness is the heart of the Heart Sutra, the radical text revealing the infinite inclusive view of mahayana Buddhism. It continues the spiritual tradition of disrupting the comforting assumptions which keep us from awakening to the truth of our lives. This tradition is central to the unfolding of Buddhism and is manifest in the life of Gautama Buddha.

In his youth Gautama Buddha was known as Siddhartha. On his father's instructions he was protected from all harsh circumstances and offered only pleasure. This gave him a very restricted view of life. In his early manhood his beliefs were challenged by events which put in question the complacent ease of his privileged life. Venturing out of his pleasure-oriented home he saw a sick person, an old person and a corpse. Encountering life as it is rather than as the fantasy he had been encouraged to imagine confronted him with the fact that the security which surrounded him had no solid foundation. Even his own precious body, the site of pleasure, was vulnerable and liable to illness, accidents and decay.

Through these challenging experiences he gained an understanding that things are not what they appear to be. Situations arise due to causes and conditions which are often not obvious to us. In order to simplify our experience we take situations for granted, as if they were simply there by themselves.

Siddhartha had grown up in an environment where all his needs were effortlessly catered for. There was an ease and smoothness to his life, since everyone around him made sure that nothing was allowed to trouble him. Not to be troubled is, of course, something we all yearn for. But since life itself is turbulent and disturbing, the ease he experienced was an artificial construct lacking authenticity.

Having been shocked awake from this pleasant dreamscape he encountered a wandering holy man and this inspired him to leave home in search of the cause of suffering. It had become clear to him that we easily believe things that are not true and settle for a very partial sense of how life is. He started to explore the nature of the glue that holds our deluded sense of the world together. He came to see that the glue is the joint activity of ignoring and attaching: ignoring the immediacy of experience and the openness of the experiencer we become attached to ideas of self and other.

First we inherit or create a concept and then identify a pattern of transient experience with that concept. By this means the object and our idea about the object become merged as the sense that there is a real self-existing thing. Furthermore, we invest this entity that we have identified/created with values corresponding to our cultural and individual frames of reference. For example, we are here together in a building and we can see how it is put together with a lot of cement. As long as the cement holds the stones in place, we see the seamless shapes of rooms and passages. We see shapes which appear to be just themselves as they are. They appear as given and we take them for granted. We take all that we encounter, people, animals, objects, to be existing in themselves. We ignore cause and effect and all the evidence of the constructive effort that has given rise to 'things'. The substance of 'things' is not intrinsic but is established through the play of concepts and interpretation.

We create structures or patterns of interpretation and meaning and then believe in them to such an extent that we feel that they are existing by themselves, in and of themselves. For example, if we go to an art gallery and see a painting that we like the shapes and colours seem to catch us. We feel ourselves drawn into the image as it comes alive for us. But we can also see the brush strokes and the marks of the palette knife. The painting hovers between these two aspects. It is both just what it is, the thing itself, and, simultaneously, it presents a history of the activity of its creation.

The artist has built the image up bit by bit. She took colour after colour, rubbing some down, scraping, and then building up again. Gradually she arrived at the point where, as an artist, she felt that the work was done. When looking at paintings we tend to be taken in by the seeming thingness of them, their facticity, the immediate felt sense that they are what they are. Artists themselves tend to be more curious about how the work of others was made for they know that art is inseparable from artifice. Indeed, art has often been based on the skill of creating the illusion that the art object is free of artifice. This is a higher form of artifice.

Our lack of curiosity about people and things is astounding. For example, with regard to my watch I am primarily interested in the fact that it works. I'm not very interested in what goes on inside it because I simply want this watch to be a watch that does what I expect it to do. I want it to quietly and efficiently let me take it for granted. If something goes wrong with it then it becomes a source of trouble for me since I don't know how to repair it. I don't want my lack of curiosity and understanding to be challenged. I want to stay safe in the dream of my assumptions. I want the objects in my world to simply be what I want them to be, and nothing else. My ignorance of how the watch works creates a sweet harmony with my naive confidence that I can use it to tell the time. That is to say, I fall asleep in the watchness of the watch and I don't want to encounter problems that would force me to awaken from this. When I see the objects of my daily life I am neither troubled nor inspired by them because I have confidence in my view of their simply facticity, a view generated by my entire education and life experience. I know what everything is and what it is for and that is enough. *"I'm not stupid, I know that a watch is a watch!"*

Yet, as Siddhartha came to realise, it is through this very confidence that I demonstrate that I am indeed a stupid person, for when I see the watch in terms of my assumptions, I am encapsulated within my restricted view which reveals only a very small segment of the object's potential. The world that I inhabit seems to be made of stuff that I know and due to relying on this knowledge I don't experience the actuality of my world and of myself.

Four hundred years ago there were people who understood how everything they encountered was made. Nowadays we each have many objects, like mobile phones, which operate in ways we don't understand and have potential functions of which we use perhaps five per cent. This points to the Buddha's original concern: how do we come to fall asleep in our limiting assumptions? Why is this dull sensibility so attractive to us? We fall asleep and become preoccupied with our dreams of self-existing entities. We take the seeming givenness of the world to be reliable and not requiring of examination.

The five skandha compositional factors

Gautama Buddha's initial presentation of his responses to this enquiry is known as the 'first turning of the wheel of dharma'. In it he showed that the seeming given-ness of appearances rests on the interplay of their constituent parts. He pointed out that people have no definite essence generating their apparent wholeness. In fact their appearance arises from the dynamic interaction of five factors which he called the five *skandha* compositional factors

According to his analysis the first aspect or component encountered is *form*, or rather, *form/sensation*, by which is indicated our registering of shape and colour.

As we become aware of a form there arises a *feeling-tone* of positive, negative or neutral. This is the second component by which we adopt a reactive positioning. We see a form and we have an instant sense of liking, not liking or indifference.

Thirdly, there occurs *perception/apprehension* by which we shape what is occurring according to the polarities which we use as our organising categories, e.g. male/female, black/white and so on. Our apprehension groups phenomena into patterns and rhythms, generating a sense of known-ness and predictability.

This apprehension activates our capacity for *formation/formative action*, the fourth aspect, which assembles an interpretive matrix feeding into what we believe we are seeing. Thus, on the basis of our apprehension of a specific 'object' many thoughts and feelings come to mind, linking the present moment with previous experiences, activating our habit of comparing and contrasting and preparing us to respond. These consolidating associations don't have to be intentionally brought to mind; in fact they often seem to arrive together like a flock of birds.

For example, on the table beside me is a plastic bottle containing water. The sight of it is in itself refreshing for it tells me I need not be thirsty as I talk. Now if the same bottle of water were in a car on a long hot journey, at the point when I wanted a drink the following thoughts might well arise in my mind. *"When it's hot, chemicals are leached from the plastic into the water and this makes it a bit toxic. Perhaps I shouldn't drink it. But there again, I am thirsty."* This wary thought, arising from something I heard somewhere from someone, creates a new relationship with the bottle of water. Previously it had been marked by the sense of health and refreshment but now there is ambivalence and insecurity. This is the formative power of associations: the 'object' is configured in my mind in a particular way in this particular moment generating a particular impact. There is no fixed value to the object, its value and significance for me arise with the specific factors operating in and around me at this particular moment. This formation is largely preconscious and non-volitional. Meaning is generated in, through and as patterns. Patterns have boundaries and are simultaneously inclusive and exclusive: apprehension that if it is plastic (bad), then it is not glass (good). Meaning comes from being allocated membership of categories, groups, sets and so on. Defining something simply in terms of itself, without using language that links it to something else, is impossible. This fourth organizing factor is the formative interrelatedness of all phenomena which actively interact together allowing particular 'entities' to seem to come into being.

The fifth aspect is *consciousness/comprehension* by which I take hold of the 'object' with my mind and come to a conclusion about it. This can occur with greater or lesser conscious attention. To know something is to know a particular definable piece of the world, and this quality of 'something-ness' is taken to show the presence of an individual entity. Our comprehension establishes for us the knowability of the world and our own potency as knowers of the world. Since we rely on this for our sense of self, when we can't work out what is going on we tend to feel anxious and even stupid.

According to this early Buddhist analysis, all the phenomena of the world, both external and internal, can be understood as composites created by the interaction or juxtaposition of these five skandha compositional factors. This view of the world designates the goal of meditation practice to be the lessening of the rapidity and intensity of such pattern-formation so that what appears can be seen for what it is, a transient, contingent patterning devoid of self-substance. Awakening to this brings a lessening of involvement and disturbance. On this level of analysis these five basic factors of composition are taken to be the basic elements or irreducible components of a person. The 'personhood' of the person is revealed as an empty illusion but the five compositional factors seem to be basic existents. In order to get closer to what is actually the case we have to move from intellectual analysis to direct experience arising in meditation.

Developing calm and clear insight

If you calm down your speed of mental functioning through the practice of meditation, you will start to wash out the glue of investment and involvement that holds the composite forms of our world together. There are two main meditation practices used for this, *shamatha* – calming the mind through focusing on the breath or some simple external object – and *vipassana* – seeing clearly, observing what actually occurs in its basic simplicity prior to interpretation. The first approach develops calm and the second develops clear insight which penetrates habitual assumptions.

At first calm focussed attention sounds like something we do, an activity that we could become better at by making an effort. This view would lead us to mobilise our will, to develop a clear intention and then struggle to maintain it in the face of our inevitable tendency to get distracted. However such effortful struggle is not the royal road to calm. As long as I intentionally identify myself with just one state, the natural movement of my other states or potentials will tend to displace the construct I am claiming as myself. The surface level of calm can be established by ensuring the absence of disturbance. Yet, no matter how hard we strive to maintain this calm, events, both outer and inner, will bring reaction and movement.

Yet the capacity for deep unchanging calm is already present within us – present, yet over-layered by the agitating pulsation of subject and object generating arousal and habits of distraction. Our arousal tends to focus on seeking advantage – finding more of what we like – and avoiding disadvantage – getting rid of what we don't like. It is our very own activity that obscures our own calm. Seduced by our own interpretations we fuse into attraction, aversion or indifference towards whatever we encounter.

Hence, the true path we require is not one of trying to do something but rather of letting go of our habits of unnecessary and unhelpful arousal. Our ego, of course, makes use of arousal to secure its own starring role in the drama of our lives. Our ego-self is drawn towards distraction as a means of maintaining the ego identity we have put so much effort into developing. The exit is simple, though not easy: relax!

Once we have established a calm, focused attention we can start to focus on seeing clearly. We do this by directing our calm attention towards the top of our head and then scanning our body from head to toe and back up – repeating this slowly again and again. Doing this we might at one point become aware of a sensation, let's say, in our shoulder. Experiencing it as unpleasant our normal response might be to assert, *"Oh, my shoulder is sore."* and this might feel like an accurate perception, a simple description of what is happening. Actually it is an interpretive conclusion which hides rather than discloses the simple actuality of the phenomenon.

There are many stages prior to arriving at thinking, *"I have a sore shoulder."* What is it that is actually registering as a simple phenomenon? There is an event of proprioception, a transient arising of internal sensation. What is it like? Difficult to say. Maybe it's tearing or burning or dull. We can probably feel some sensation in our body just now and if we attend to the immediacy of it, something is present but on the very edge of language. However, if we wrap this ungraspable moment in a story then we can do something with it. We might think, *"Oh, my back is a bit sore. I need to take more exercise. I need to go to an osteopath."* Once we fix the fleeting phenomenon by applying a term like 'pain', we extract it from the flow of direct experience and invest it with the sense of it being an enduring problem. Some 'thing' is there and yet this something which appears to be real is in fact a concept. By relying on this abstract idea, the various sensations arising and passing as we scan that area again and again can be gathered together under the heading of 'pain'. The transient sensations are misappropriated to feed the illusory 'reality' installed through our belief that the concept tells us the truth about what is actually occurring.

Now we have something definite to talk about because we seem to be talking about things that are real and accessible to others' understanding. In fact we are talking about names and concepts, because what actually occurs is inexpressible in language. The ability to apply such constructive concepts meaningfully is the basis of our social identity and functioning. The world of description appears to be shared, real and communicable whereas the world of experience is ungraspable, strange and evanescent. If a friend says to us, *"Oh my back is really sore,"* we can join in the conversation. We know the sorts of things one can say when talking about pain – this is a social skill, a way of connecting by talking about the idea, the concept, the name of something as if you were apprehending the real. Yet the actuality of the experience itself remains inexpressible. Our comments are socially adapted, carrying a sense of shared values and experience, and this illusion hides the actual. However if we were talking with friends and one said, *"Ooh, oww, aah,"* it wouldn't seem meaningful. How would we reply? *"Ouh, ouh"?* We would start to lose our shared assumption that we are living in the same world, a world which language seems to describe.

What we call 'our world' is constructed out of signs, signifying words that support further elaboration and interpretation. From the Buddhist view it is not that we can or should avoid

using these signs, but we do need to recognise that they are a language game, an interplay of intrinsically empty signs generating illusory formations which refer to nothing but patterns in the semiotic web. Our language use does not describe truly existing objective entities, for such 'things' do not exist. Rather language speaks to language in an infinite conversation, endlessly generating new combinations, new meanings, new palaces of illusion to be inhabited for a while. The appearance of things is illusory and yet beguiling.

The task is then to see the illusory quality of appearance – to see that though it is impactful it is devoid of essence and self-substance – and then to maintain this clarity even as we participate in the world of 'things'. By slowing down the rate of interaction of these many constitutive factors, we start to see how seemingly real entities arise from the basic moments of experience transformed into building blocks.

However this very slowness achieved through the practice of calm and insight makes it more difficult to be with others as they habitually take themselves to be. We would be so focused on the examination of details that we wouldn't be able to do very much in the world. We would become socially useless people.

The Buddha encouraged his followers to become monks and nuns since using the approach of calm and clear to gain enlightenment required a lifestyle very different from that of those engaged in the worldly actions which fed and supported the monks and nuns. Does this put a limit on the number of people who can become 'enlightened'? The lack of direct social functions for the holy ones was disguised by the symbolic significance that they accrued through time. This further intensified the contrast between lay people and ordained monks and nuns. Nevertheless, the inclusive nature of the Buddha's teaching pointed to its value for all sentient beings and not just for a renunciate elite.

The shift of emphasis in mahayana

The idea of buddhanature was elaborated in what is known as 'the second turning of the wheel of dharma'. This turning indicates that the capacity for full awakening is already present in all beings, and so the focus of practice shifted from renunciation and development to the union of wisdom and compassion. The Heart Sutra sets out the deconstruction of the erroneous view of dualism and makes explicit the wisdom of awakening to the unborn or empty actuality of all phenomena, including ourselves. It indicates how the separation of high and low, sacred and profane, self and other, and all the other binary oppositions leads to a consolidating reifying view which feeds the delusion that we are in control of what is going on. When we see that grasping at illusion generates delusion, our intrinsic capacity for wisdom then shines forth. This wisdom promotes the awakening of sentient beings to their own empty open actuality and is itself the deepest compassion.

The view of the five skandha compositional factors discussed above is a homeopathic approach to the problem or disease of our habitual use of categories, concepts and signs to gain a sense of order and control over ourselves and our environment. The five compositional factors form a meta-category within which the wide diversity of our manifesting experience can be contained, ordered and controlled. Although it operates in

the same way as the categorising organising systems of our culture, it has a different intention. It seeks to be an antidote to suffering whilst still relying on concepts and signs. It is, however, the reliance on these mental tools for mediating subject-object interaction which has us wandering in samsara.

In the approach of the first turning the structural similarity of disease and antidote affirms the reality of what are taken to be the basic components of existence. This means that this path to liberation is long and slow. To see that sentient beings are composites of the five compositional factors requires an analytic approach demanding time, discipline and a disengagement from the flow of experience. We gain clarity but at the cost of connectivity, of empathic attunement, of the involvement which is our human condition. In contrast the mahayana approach offers the depth and spaciousness we need to see the illusory play of phenomena and so free ourselves of reificatory reliance on it whilst being able to participate with love and compassion. Renunciation (the earliest approach) arises from an either/or reading of our situation whereas the view of non-duality (the mahayana approach) leads us to a both/and approach.

The mahayana approach – both in its general sutra form and in its specialised sub-sets, chan, zen, tantra, mahamudra, dzogchen and so on – is not primarily antidotal. It indicates that, by seeing that empty, unborn non-entities are our actual experience, and that the experiencer is also an empty unborn non-entity, reification has no basis on which to form. The illusory nature of all phenomena, including ourselves, becomes obvious. Since there is no ignorance there are no obstacles for we are freed from the hope of gain and the fear of loss. This is set out very clearly in the Heart Sutra itself.

However it is important to remember that although the text sets out the nature of illusion and the simple requirement of non-activity, our habitual anxiety and doubt cling to a wish for careful step-by-step progression. This lack of trust in emptiness turns us towards striving on a path where we encounter real obstacles to be overcome.

The Heart Sutra brings together the seemingly conflicting approaches of the first and second turnings. By gently emphasising emptiness as the common basis for all entities and for all views it dissolves the grounds for conflict. In the text a close disciple of Buddha Shakyamuni, the venerable monk and arhat Shariputra, is the representative of the first turning of the wheel of dharma. The mahayana second turning is represented by bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. In the text they collaborate in a new way arising from the energy of the meditation of Buddha Shakyamuni, the guarantor of intrinsic truth. Shariputra poses questions and Avalokiteshvara replies revealing the clarity of the mahayana view of emptiness. He clarifies that the five compositional factors and all the other concepts that are used by sentient beings to make sense of experience are in fact devoid of inherent existence being empty of real self-substance.

The differences that we take to be definitive of the identity of entities have no substance to them – all appearance is inseparable from emptiness. Free of being either existing or non-existing the rich complexity of appearance is empty in and of itself. Emptiness is not a metaphysical substance or quintessence; it is the Other that deconstructs the polarity of self and other. Emptiness is the ground of non-duality.

From this viewpoint, the illusion of a self is not something to be dismantled in the way one could dismantle this building, taking the cement out and separating all the pieces of stone and wood. If that was done then the materials which had constituted the building could be put together in different shapes to make different kinds of buildings. One form would be gone but others would arise if both the belief in real entities and attachment to the act of building were not ended.

When taken to be irreducible essences, these five compositional factors appear to be building blocks that can be endlessly juxtaposed forming different patterns which create the many different beings and objects that we experience. This would indicate that if they are truly separated out and not allowed to join together they could no longer generate illusory forms and we would be free of danger and suffering. This is the approach of the first turning. However even with their separation and non-activation there remains the notion of entities, of substances, of irreducible essences and so the root of the problem is merely rendered latent for it has not vanished forever. Seeing the absence of inherent self-nature in beings does not itself dissolve the reification of phenomena.

Something more radical is required and this is the view which Avalokiteshvara supplies when he says, "*Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.*" With this view, when we see a form, we don't need to do anything to it, it doesn't need to be transformed into another kind of form in order for it to be less dangerous or more integrate-able. What is required is merely that we see form as it is, a transient experience empty of self-nature, like a cloud in the sky. If we do this rather than projecting our fantasies onto it then, without effort, ignorance, grasping, obscuration, karmic traits will all show their transparency since they too lack real substantial existence. With the clarity of living this view as direct experience and not mere belief, we don't have to analyse the object because the object that we see is not a separate thing, but part of the non-dual self-revealing clarity of emptiness. Subject and object are inseparable and non-dual with emptiness.

For example, there is a small tree beside me just now. It's obvious to us all that it is a tree. What do we see? We see a tree. No! We interpret a tree! We are constructing what is there by our own familiar and habitual mental activity. When we take the tree-ness of the tree to be something present within the tree, we don't recognise that 'tree' is the end product of a whole series of interpretations which come together very quickly. We can analyse the way in which we ourselves give rise to the seductive illusion of self-existing entities. We can observe the process of constructing which underpins whatever appears to be the case. When we are able to see our own constructs as illusion it becomes clear that we ourselves generate all that obscures the truth. Ceasing from composition allows all that we encounter, including ourselves, to reveal their primordial emptiness. Given that actual events are fleeting our analysis tends to be retrospective and concerned with abstractions because we are considering our ideas about the phenomena rather than the phenomena themselves.

For this analysis we start with the conclusion 'this is a tree' and try to examine on what basis we came to this conclusion. Firstly, I observed shape and colour. Then I experience a positioning-reaction to it: pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. This draws me towards or away from what I'm seeing since the quality that I experience as inherent in the object evokes in

me a felt sense that 'I like it' or that 'I don't like it'. The sense of me being connected to an entity towards which I am having a feeling-tone reaction, evokes further distorting emotions (*kleshas*) such as desire, anger, jealousy, envy and pride.

Such an enquiry reveals that I am not a neutral observer of a world that exists by itself 'out there'. I am implicated and deeply involved in the generation of my experience of my world, which in fact is the only world I have access to. Now, if I'm involved in this way in generating the objects of my experience, then clearly the object is not self-existing and neither am I since the 'contents' of my identity are also dynamic, contingent and situational. When I look at an object it is very difficult to take my liking or not liking out of it. There isn't a pure object out there nor a pure subject in here – this is the strange fact of co-emergence. The object and I are both born together; we arise into this moment together and neither subject nor object has any separate self-essence defining it and making it what it is. Our interpretation is inseparable from our perception. This makes analysis in the lived moment very, very difficult.

Experience arises due to causes and conditions; independent subjectivity or objectivity is an illusion. Objectivity is like literary trope, an image or a theme, it is a style or mood like tragedy or romantic comedy – nothing more than that. Whenever we focus our attention it is already suffused with attitudinal factors and this generates certain qualities of experience.

For example, if you look at a photograph of a scientific laboratory you see a very precise, tidy, clean situation. The staff wear protective gowns and there is a mood of seriousness. They are creating the theatre of science. A lot of resources go into the elaboration of these structures and the dramatic and narrative moods they generate. We no longer believe that philosophers can show the world as it is nor offer much wisdom about it. We gave up a long time ago on theologians being able to establish the true existence of God. Yet we do still believe that science will offer some true knowledge that is both objectively true and personally meaningful. We take it to be a deep enquiry into what is real.

However, the main thrust of the Heart Sutra is to point to the delusion of seeking some item or 'fact' possessing real self-existence. This mahayana view points out that there is an absence of fundamental contradiction between appearances which seem to have substance and their actuality of emptiness, the absence of inherent self-nature. Here 'nothing' is not a mere empty void for emptiness shows itself as all the appearances which we experience. Although we experience appearances to be real we can find nothing within them which is existing in and of itself. Appearance and emptiness are non-dual, neither the same nor different. Appearance is the appearance of emptiness, just this, precise, ungraspable, strange and beyond thought and expression.

If I say to you, "*The leaves on this tree are blue.*" would you be willing to agree? No! The leaves are green. How do we know they're green? Because they're not blue, they're not red, they're not yellow. If the only colour that exists is green, if everything in this universe is green, would the word 'green' have any meaning? No. The greenness of the green comes into play through its difference from yellow, from red and so on. Moreover some colours are complementary and some are contrasting, hence the specific green of each leaf looks different when set against the differently coloured walls and floor.

When we see this green, this specific green seems to be something inherent in these leaves. It is obvious to us that the leaves are green with their own greenness; they are manifesting greenness. Yet this greenness is not a property inherent in the leaf. This greenness is revealed in relation to all that is not this green. There is no intrinsic or inherent specific greenness in the green of the leaf; the specific quality of greenness varies with the intensity and quality of the light shining on it. The green is in the light reflected by the leaf. The green we see is the relation between the potential of light and the surface quality of the leaf. There is no essence of greenness in the leaf even though greenness appears to be inherent in the leaf. Some of the leaves have a lot of light shining on them, some have a little, and some are in the shadow. The leaves in these different places appear differently. *"Ah, but you don't need to worry about that, because we know that in fact they all are green! It doesn't matter what they look like."*

Due to the power of our interwoven concepts we are confident that we know the simple truth that every leaf is green, just green. This seems to ring true – but it is not a truth resting on the phenomena themselves. Rather this seeming truth is grounded in belief, in reliance on an abstract concept, an idea, a notion of 'green' as a reliable sign with a trustworthy remit. What we see is not merely what our concepts indicate nor is it the simple object itself. Appearance is a multifactorial, irreducibly complex yet immediate experience. Subject and object arise together, mutually influencing, mutually creating the illusion of their inherent difference and separation so that I can trust that my subjectivity tells me the truth about the leaves. When I know they are all green, I apprehend their shared greenness even when I can see that every leaf doesn't appear with the same shade of green.

By focusing on what is in front of us, appearance, which is actual, is being privileged over the usual 'boss', the concept, the interpretation. This way of looking and seeing dissolves the elaboration enacted by our habitual mental activity. This helps us to see that we don't see. What we take to be seeing is projection, interpretation, assumption. Both subject and object are essentially empty; our sense of their substance, their inherent reality, is a miasma produced by our own deluding mental activity. Our eyes show us many different shades of green. Yet our interpretation says, *'Well, they're all green, it just depends on the light,'* as if the greenness were a clearly established true essence and the difference in illumination is simply contingent, a mere secondary environmental factor.

The absence of a defining essence in any phenomenon, whether it appears as subject or object is what the Buddha is pointing to with the term *shunyata*, emptiness. Shunyata means empty, empty of substance, empty of any essence or inherent self-nature which is self-confirming, self-existing, self-validating. If we say that the green is present equally in each of the leaves and that the fact that they look different doesn't tell us anything important, then we are going for an essentialistic reading. That is to say, we are discounting the phenomena as they show themselves, that they 'are' in fact what they appear to be. However the season, the time of day, the fact that the windows are rather dirty and that the light is being filtered through these accretions and all such factors are not extrinsic to the intrinsic truth of the same greenness of each of the leaves. The leaves and the plant are not 'things' apart from us. They are, in this moment, aspects of our lived and living continuum – the flow of non-dual experience which is our unfolding life.

Yet it is normal for us to believe that these factors are all incidental and that the greenness of the green is essentially embedded in the leaf. This belief has the advantage of giving us a sense of secure knowledge about our world and with this comes a sense of its predictability. We then have confidence that we have a degree of control and mastery over the patterning of our experience. If you live in this town, you know your way around, you know how the streets work and which bus to take from here to there. When you know which bus to take, then when the bus with the right number on the front arrives, you get on. Maybe it's even the same bus you got on yesterday. It would of course look a bit different. Maybe the driver is different. The other passengers are different. Even if by chance they were exactly the same people, maybe they are wearing different clothes. They have different moods, different facial expressions and so on, different postures. This is what we encounter. But when you take an essentialistic reading of the situation you can say, *"Ah, I'm back on the usual bus. No need to think about the bus, I'll just read my book."* In this way our assumptions sing a gentle lullaby and help us to dream our way through life.

Releasing fixation frees creativity

The Heart Sutra opened the way for the development of both the madhyamika view of the foundational status of emptiness and the yogacharya view of the ceaseless flow of creativity. Their mutual enlivenment fed the approach of tantra which focuses on allowing a complete opening to the transformed field of experience. The word 'tantra' indicates continuity, the continuity of the flow of experience free of reification, fragmentation and judgement.

For example, we are sitting here. If you simply turn your head and look from side to side panning across the room, many different moments of experience are revealed. The world shows itself immediately and seamlessly and yet is open to inspection of the details of what is shown. Each of our lives is woven by the crisscrossing of these two aspects. There is the aspect of enquiry, of examining what occurs and trying to identify how it can be located in the categories that make sense for us. Appearances are seen in terms of qualities which can be identified, named, and evaluated according to multiple criteria and then assembled and edited in terms of the model of the world we believe in. This aspect is familiar to us and is appreciated for the sense of agency it gives to our ego-self. The other aspect is less familiar as it requires us to be directly present with the entirety of the given-ness of the field of experience as it unfolds moment by moment.

If I follow this latter path fully I will be participating, but how would I know what is going on? How could I give an account of my experience? What would be the basis of talking about 'it'? The simplicity of non-duality will not be found by pursuing such questions. Everything is here and yet each 'something' is nothing in and of itself. The living truth of this nonduality is revealed through non-conceptual meditation.

The interdependence and mutual validation of both words and concepts parallels the interdependence and mutual validation of the phenomena we encounter, including ourselves. Single words need other words to give them meaning. Single moments need other moments to give them meaning. Yet both these meanings are constructs, relative truths operating within the play of comparing and contrasting. The commentary we give about

'what is going on', the thinking and talking 'about' stuff is part of the unfolding lived picture. It is not a neutral view from nowhere, it is not extrinsic to what is occurring but is part of our being in the world with others. Talking is participative not objective; it forms gestures of engagement, not true knowledge of 'things'. The use of language to establish reliable truths, truths that survive out of context, is, from this viewpoint, a misleading exercise and one which will easily consume the hours and years of this all-too-brief life. So perhaps judgement and commentary are overvalued.

According to the mahayana point of view, enlightenment is knowing nothingness as it shows itself rather than focusing just on the interpreted details of what's going on and having an opinion about them. Thus we move from cognitive apprehension, from getting hold of things via concepts, towards the immediacy of the revelation of the clarity and creativity of the mind itself. Immediacy is infinite and inclusive; it displays non-duality free of effort whereas cognitive apprehension employs conceptual elaboration to generate the knowledge of entities, each of which is finite and exclusive.

Tantra makes great use of music, chanting and other forms of sound; mudra hand gestures, postures and other forms of body formation; colours, mandala shapes, tormas offerings and many different stimuli for the eyes; and many different visualisations employing the fullest extent of our creative imagination. All these tools and practices express the simultaneous presence of the clarity of inexpressible openness and the specificity of each precise meaningful detail. Thus tantra is the embodied experience of the fact of non-duality set out so clearly in the Heart Sutra. The space of creativity is revealed through the deconstruction of the central status we ascribe to the individual person or ego-self. The direct experience of this open spaciousness decentralizes the organizing function of 'me, mine, myself'.

For example, you might go shopping for something as simple as a T-shirt. In the shop they might have a hundred different kinds of T-shirts. Immediately you can tell that fifty of them are terrible. Who could wear such nonsense? Not me! What is the organizing principle of this instant discernment? Me. My values, my history. This is what we bring when we go shopping in the supermarket. The shop has a thousand kinds of food and you have just a little basket. How many kinds of things do you see and never buy? Who buys them? People called 'not me'. The world is full of 'not-me's' who buy the things that I don't buy. This is fundamental. Each of us is the centre of the world, our world. The fact that other people live as 'not me' and seem to be okay about this indicates that there are multiple worlds – each with a sentient being at its centre. We cannot truly know what it is to be them; the best we can get is the simulacrum provided by language: our account of what it is 'like' to be us and their account of what it is 'like' to be them. If we relax into our unique specificity we find that it is grounded in the wisdom of emptiness, the radiant clarity of the mind which is not a thing.

The ego feels lonely

The infinite aloneness of infinite awareness is not lonely. But the self-referential ego easily feels lonely. It doesn't like being isolated because it feels instinctively that isolation is death. The ego is part of the matrix of dependent arising – the illusion of entities, the

interplay of all phenomena – whereas awareness, the intrinsic clarity of the mind, is unborn as an entity and so is independent and invulnerable.

Ego is a misleading illusion. It is the assertion of the lie that 'I exist in and of myself' and due to this it is the site of our suffering. Our ego cannot escape the sense that 'it's all up to me' – and so it feels lonely, insecure and burdened. If I make bad choices my life becomes difficult. I see other people and they seem to have happy lives and so I hate them, I envy them. It's not fair! Why did my mother not tell me how to live? Deeply seeing that this is how we manifest is very helpful. If you see that your entire experience of the world is mediated through your historically collected set of assumptions, evaluations and interpretive structures, then you see that your sense of self is a contingent pattern rather than your true nature. In seeing that, you are, paradoxically, freed from the encapsulating delusion of being simply what you thought you were. We wake up on becoming aware of the illusory nature of our dreams – but as long as we deeply believe that our dream-self is all that we are we will resist waking up.

The ego hooks itself into existence. It is essentially empty having no essence but emptiness. There is nothing intrinsic to our ego that makes us who we are. The ego is a tendency, a tilt away from the truth of how it is. Its actual ground is emptiness but its relative ground is duality, the deluded and deluding notion that subject and object are truly separate and are inherently internally defined. The felt sense of being somebody specific, of being 'me,' which is the hallmark of the ego, generates a parallel view that there are somethings out there which could be advantageous or disadvantageous to me. By hooking onto these 'some-things', taking them to be really existing and seeing them as either necessary or expendable, the ego uses the other to elaborate its own interactive positionings which are actually the constituents of its sense of being an individual and unique self. It can then hook memories, hopes, opinions and so on from its pattern repertoire and constitute itself moment by moment in the seeming 'truth' and 'givenness' of being just this. Taking the transient to be permanent is the hallmark of the ego's domain.

No hooks for hanging our assumptions

However, the illumination provided by directly seeing that 'everything is empty' shows us that the objects we see have no intrinsic hook on which we could hang our assumptions. Moreover we ourselves are hook-less. All hooks are projections of the imagination; they are illusions like a rainbow or a mirage. We tell ourselves things about ourselves. This telling, this flow of concepts, some of which seem to be 'subject' and some of which seem to be 'object', is endless as the play of the mutual hooking of empty signs.

The signs seem to be signifiers, seem to be indicating that all this thinking and talking is *about* something – but actually these signs refer to nothing real. Signs refer to signs, creating palaces in the air. It is our own belief and investment in them that generates the delusion of the substantial entities that they seem to be referring to. Like the complementary sides of Velcro, subject and object hook each other, but this hooking catches nothing enduring or sustaining. All appearances are empty of self, they are inseparable from emptiness. This is the empty play of empty signs. If we seek something reliable we will be disappointed for there is nothing substantial there.

The spring that never runs dry

Yet this nothing, if we stay with it, if we let ourselves be it – for that is who and what we are – will show itself to be a cornucopia, to be a spring that never runs dry, and the flow of compassionate empty display will be unceasing. This is the inseparability of wisdom and compassion. Wisdom is seeing, seeing that there is no substantial basis, no self-existing entitative substance in any phenomena. This means that we don't know much about anything no matter how many stories we can tell!

'Knowing about' is a delusion as it assumes that there was something there before we started knowing about it. Since there is nothing actually there to know about – nothing that is real in and of itself – 'knowing about' is actually the process of creating that which we think we have come to know about. Seeing this is a relief for it shows the emptiness or illusory nature of our judgements and prejudices, those certainties which lead to foreclosure of the open potential of each situation. Such foreclosure makes us narrow-minded and bigoted, pre-occupied with delusional seriousness and certainty. *"Well, you know what John is like..."* The starting point of such delicious gossip is our agreement that there is a person called John, who is knowable in and as the John-ness of John. How do we have the confidence to know who John is? By ignoring the fact that what we call 'John' is a potential. John is the name given to a particular site of manifestation. John manifests according to circumstances and so no one can 'know' the totality of John since this infinite potential is beyond totalisation.

The same applies to what is referred to by our own names – it is a site of unknowable yet ever-revealing potential rather than a definable and knowable entity. However, we can often feel pressure from others to be knowable and predictable, for if we are not reliable, in terms of their image of who we are, we appear to be shaking their world. If you keep people in their boxes then you know where you are with them. The extreme form of this is the structure of totalitarian regimes where the state presumes to know exactly who and what and of what value each of its citizens is. Total definition leads to final conclusions: 'Because you are this and nothing more we have no need of you and so you must die.'

Awakening to emptiness means to see the lack of validity in the constructs which we layer on top of the transient appearances which constitute our world. It doesn't mean that if we see the empty illusory nature of these constructs there will be nothing there at all. What is present in the space freed of the clutter of reified and reifying concepts is the vitality of the ceaselessly presenting field of experience. When the space of the heart opens and its intrinsic clarity illuminates our gaze, we are able to see all and receive all. When this happens we live in non-duality, for there is no separation. This is the freshness and nakedness of unmediated awareness free of concepts, symbols and all modes of added meaning. Being complete in itself it has no need of artificial additives or confused attempts to 'improve' it. We are healed by being inseparable from the whole.

The Heart Sutra is encouraging us towards a deconstruction or unloosening or divesting of the assumptions which stop us from being open to what is here. This opens the direct revealing of the middle way between mere nothingness and real substance. We're not glued into things, believing that they are truly real, nor are we trying to develop a protective space,

an isolation and avoidance. Rather, by staying relaxed, open and present, we will find our manifest presence shaping itself usefully and harmoniously within the non-dual emergent field.

This spontaneous improvisation is not arising from the ego and so is intrinsically free of self-referential bias. As 'we' (the ego) get out of our own way, we (awareness) effortlessly display what is fitting. This sense of fitting is grounded in the infinity of the field and so can display any of the four activities: pacifying, increasing, over-awing and eliminating. When the ego accepts its place as part of the flow of experience, we find that our intuitive awareness responds to the many levels or contours of the topology of the field. Then all movement is clearly part of the field in the service of the whole of the field and may be connective or disruptive according to the direction of emergent patterning. When we relax from fixation in and on our own history we open to a potential far beyond the capacity of our various ego configurations.

The Heart Sutra is a very helpful tool for unlocking the fixity which holds us in our familiar place. Rigid identification, whether it's how we identify ourselves or identify other people or objects around us, loosens up allowing us to experience our access to open potential as a richness of resourcing appearing for the benefit of all. Rather than keeping our hands and minds full, carrying the memories, plans and so forth which we make as the basis of our identity, we live with open hands and open hearts.

Letting go of our particular *some-things* we have *no-thing* in particular and yet paradoxically everything is now available to us. The less we define ourselves the more we can access the many, many resources that are here awaiting us.

So thank you for inviting me here. I hope you found this interesting in some way, though perhaps it was not what you were expecting.

The Heart Sutra

The Heart of Perfect Liberating Transcendental Wise Discerning

In the language of India: **Bhagawatiprajnaparamitahridaya**. In the language of Tibet: **bChom-IDan-'Das-Ma Shes-Rab-Kyi Pha-Rol-Tu Phyin-Pa'i sNying-Po**. Forming just one bundle of paper.

Thus I have heard, at one time Bhagawan was staying at the Vulture Peak Hill at Rajagriha together with a great assembly of the sangha of ordained monks and bodhisattvas.

At that time Bhagawan was resting evenly in the absorbed contemplation known as 'Profound Illumination', which discerns the nature of phenomena.

At that time the great bodhisattva Arya Avalokitesvara was clearly observing within the profound practice of transcendental wise discerning. Through this he truly saw the natural emptiness of the five factors of composition.

Then, through the power of the Buddha, the venerable Shariputra spoke as follows to the Bodhisattva-mahasattva Arya Avalokitesvara, *"In what manner should they train, those of good family who wish to follow the profound practice of transcendental wise discerning?"* Thus he spoke.

Bodhisattva-mahasattva Arya Avalokitesvara made this reply to the venerable Shariputra,

"Shariputra, whichever of those sons or daughters of a good family wishes to follow the profound practice of transcendental wise discerning should look thoroughly in the manner I will describe and thus clearly see that the five factors of composition are intrinsically empty of inherent self-nature.

Form is empty. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form. Form is not other than emptiness. In the same way, feelings, perceptions, formations and consciousness are all empty.

Thus, Shariputra, in that way all phenomena are themselves emptiness. They are free of signs and identification. They are unborn and unceasing, without stain and without freedom from stains, and are without decrease or completion.

Therefore, Shariputra, emptiness is without form, without feeling, without perception, without formation and without consciousness; without eye, without ear, without nose, without tongue, without body, without mentation; without form, without sound, without smell, without taste, without sensation, and without objects of mentation. Emptiness is without the domain of vision and without the domain of the other senses up to and including the domain of mentation. And emptiness is without all the domains of consciousness up to and including mentation consciousness.

Emptiness is free of ignorance, and of the extinction of ignorance and of all twelve factors of dependent co-arising up until old age and death and the extinction of old age and death. Similarly, emptiness is free of suffering, its cause, its cessation and the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. Emptiness is free of intrinsic original knowing and is free of attainment and also of non-attainment.

Therefore Shariputra, because there is nothing to be gained, bodhisattvas rely on transcendental wise discerning and, dwelling with minds free of obscuration, are

without fear. Having passed completely from the domain of deception they attain the full release of nirvana.

All buddhas abiding in the three times also rely on transcendental wise discerning and thus, with unexcelled, perfect awakening, are completely enlightened buddhas.

Due to this being so there is the mantra of transcendental wise discerning, the mantra of great awareness, the unsurpassed mantra. This is the mantra which balances the unbalanced. This is the mantra which completely purifies all suffering. This is not deception so you can come to know that it is true.

Recite the mantra of transcendental wise discerning:

TADYATHA OM GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA

In this way, gone, gone, gone beyond, fully gone beyond. Awakened – as it is!

Shariputra, in this way a bodhisattva-mahasattva should train in profound transcendental wise discerning.”

Then Bhagawan arose from his absorbed contemplation and praised the Bodhisattva-mahasattva Arya Avalokitesvara, saying,

“Very good. Very good. Son of a good family, it is like that. It is like that, and so profound transcendental wise discerning is to be practised just as you have shown it. All the Tathagatas will rejoice at this.”

Bhagawan spoke thus, and then the venerable Shariputra and the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara and all of their retinues, and all the gods, men, jealous gods, local spirits and so on of the world rejoiced and sincerely praised the speech of the Bhagawan Buddha.

This concludes ***‘the heart of perfect liberating transcendental wise discerning’***.

*Translated by C.R. Lama and James Low in 1978
Revised translation by James Low August 2013*

Extract from

The Noble Great Vehicle Sūtra

The Jewel Cloud Sutra

Āryaratnameghanāmahāyānasūtra

1.250

“What, you may wonder, does the great compassion of thus-gone ones consist in? Noble son, the thus-gone ones’ great compassion is endowed with thirty-two features and appears in an inconceivable manner throughout all the infinite universes in the ten directions. What are these thirty-two features? They are as follows:

1.251

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are devoid of self and yet sentient beings are not interested.

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are devoid of a sentient being and yet sentient beings speak of ‘sentient beings.’

1.252

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are devoid of a life force and yet sentient beings speak of ‘a life force.’

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are devoid of a person and yet sentient beings believe they are persons.

1.253

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are nonexistent and yet sentient beings regard them as existent.

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are devoid of location and yet sentient beings believe that they are present at locations.

1.254

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are baseless and yet sentient beings take delight in bases.

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since phenomena cannot belong to anyone and yet sentient beings think they can make things their own.

1.255

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since phenomena cannot be owned and yet sentient beings pursue ownership.

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are devoid of substantiality and yet sentient beings think they are supported by substantiality.

1.256

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are devoid of arising and yet sentient beings believe they are subject to arising. [F.50.a]

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are devoid of transference and emergence and yet sentient beings think they are subject to death and birth.

1.257

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are free of affliction and yet sentient beings are afflicted.

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are free of desire and yet sentient beings give rise to desire.

1.258

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are free of anger and yet sentient beings give rise to anger.

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are free of bewilderment and yet sentient beings are bewildered.

1.259

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are free of coming and yet sentient beings experience coming.

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are free of going and yet sentient beings experience going.

1.260

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are devoid of formation and yet sentient beings experience formation.

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are devoid of mental constructs and yet sentient beings are fond of mental constructs.

1.261

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are empty and yet sentient beings are attached to views.

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are without marks and yet sentient beings experience marks.

“The thus-gone ones feel great compassion for sentient beings since all phenomena are beyond wishes and yet sentient beings make aspirations. [F.50.b]

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<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh231.html>