
The Heart Sutra: a little look

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Excerpts

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... We come to see in such moments that learning makes us feel stupid before it makes us shine. If we don't have to learn more, we can feel quite confident. Which is why many people don't have any books in their house. You leave school, you don't have to study anymore. Then you can be confident about who you are. But we, the unfortunate ones, have gathered here to learn something new and this is not easy! We need courage, focused attention and patience. We are going to explore how we hide ourselves from ourselves...

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So, here we are, for a little time together. We are going to look at the Heart Sutra. It is a very important text in the development of buddhism. We will look at it in terms of both the view or philosophy and the meditation practice. The Heart Sutra is concerned with looking at the basic assumptions that we have about who we are and what is the nature of this world that we live in.

It offers a means to understand how our own mental processes create ways of interpreting and seeing, which create a kind of stupid clarity. Our usual way of seeing appears to offer clarity because it gives us a sense of somehow knowing something. Yet it is stupid because this very knowing is itself a kind of veil or screen which prevents us seeing directly what is here in us, as us, and all around us.

Our minds are both very bright and very lazy. When you spend time with small children you can see how shining their minds are. With great curiosity they are looking and touching, putting things in their mouth, exploring what is this. But gradually they start to know this is this! Knowing the names and functions of the objects in their world, their minds starts running ahead of their bodies. Because they know what is there, they don't have to look. You can see children walking to school with big bags on their backs, carrying many books. The body has been turned into a donkey. A donkey in the service of the mind, dedicated to the task of accumulating information.

Mind is chief

Buddhism also says the mind is chief, the mind is the maker of all things. Mind here refers not just to cognitive function but to the fundamental capacity to be aware which is the source and ground of all experience. The body and the senses, smell, taste, touch, all are the energy or display of the mind. It is not that there is a division between the mind and the body, they are not different domains. Rather our mind is the luminous clarity which reveals both what we take to be 'ourselves' and what we take to be 'other'. This luminous clarity is not an observer, not something standing apart from experience but is non-dual with experience. Thus the I which is our open awareness and the I which is our self-referential ego are not two different things or states. The openness of awareness is itself the basis from which and in which the energy or movement of manifestation occurs. This is not something personal that is sealed off from other people and our environment since all that occurs is equal in its status of all being our experience. There is no fundamental difference between self and other.

However, our sense of our body as something that moves through space and time creates for us the sense that we exist as something apart from everything else. We know that we can get up and walk through the room and this freedom of movement seems to be a sign of our separation from the environment. When I get up and move around, it is as if the whole of me is moving. But when I walk outside, I see the mist, and the mist makes me think of the loss of the summer. My body is in autumn, but my mind is in the summer.

So, now there is not just self and the world which seems separate, but also my body and my mind. Not only am I thinking about the summer, but different memories arise, some sweet, some bitter. With the sweet memory, I relax and open. With the bitter memory, I retract and close down. So now I have a body and a mind and my mind is split into bitter and sweet memories. Some of the sweet memories were moments of being lost in something. Seeing this I have to be suspicious even about my sweet memories. Moreover some of the bitter memories have led me to learn something, and so they have been useful. So the sweet memories become bitter because I got lost, and the bitter memories become sweet because I learned something. Truly we are complicated creatures.

So, we feel we have to try to make sense of our life. And this involves a lot of mental and emotional energy.

Practice of meditation

The practice of meditation offers a different possibility as it focuses on releasing our preoccupation and involvement in our mental activity including our emotions and sensations. All that we experience, including all that we take to be 'ourselves' is changing. We cannot find any fixed reliable substantial entities – and yet we chase after the idea of them again and again. Meditation allows us to observe the arising and passing of phenomena. This helps us to see them more clearly than before, yet with less investment and identification. The practice awakens us to a freshness of experience, the freshness of the world and the freshness of our awareness. It is not about arriving at a safe place where you can fall asleep. You can arrive at a safe place through being awake, but this safe place is simply the present moment, the ungraspable experience of being fully present in each moment as it occurs. This means not privileging what we take to be 'good' moments over what we take to be 'bad' moments. This habitual preference condemns us to ceaseless judgement and evaluation. We are then like a cork on the sea, lifted up and cast down by the movement of the waves.

However, if we can see that the shiny moment and the dull moment have the same ground, the same basis, then we can start to experience equanimity. Rather than being lifted up and happy when life is sweet, and then cast down and depressed when life is bitter, we relax into the openness which welcomes both the sweet and the bitter as being equally the play of our mind's energy. This is the heart of the practice.

How dharma is taught

After he gained enlightenment under the bodhi-tree in Bodhgaya, Buddha Shakyamuni decided that he wouldn't teach. He reflected that the experience he had was beyond speech so how could he say it and even if he said something, people would not understand. He walked up and down a short path beside the bodhi-tree for seven days. All the gods came and showered flowers around him and said: *"Please, please say something, you have understood the meaning of existence."* They kept asking and Brahma, the chief of all the gods, made many requests and eventually the Buddha said, 'Yes'.

This is very important in the history of dharma-teaching. That is to say, the teaching is a relationship, not a dogma. Because of the request that the Buddha teach, the Buddha taught. Without the request, he would not have taught. The teaching of dharma is relational; it is an aspect of compassion. Wisdom itself cannot be spoken; the teaching of dharma is compassion that seeks to direct students towards their own intrinsic capacity for wisdom, for awakening. Teaching is the energetic connection through an ambiance created, a mood within which something can be understood. This is partly by showing, by embodying what is being described, and partly by saying. Both are forms of connection.

When you learn to ride a horse, the most important thing is to find your seat, to find a way of sitting on the horse that allows the horse to know that you are with it. Then the horse will feel your relaxation and your warmth and your confidence and it too will settle. Each person who learns to ride has to find their seat. The teacher's knowledge of how to sit on a horse is not something that they can give to the student. Each of us has to look, to explore, to taste it. This means we have to be willing not to know. We have to avoid the error of applying what we already know to the new

situation, for if we do that, new learning, new experience will not arise. Yet, not knowing often makes us feel stupid, and when it comes to seeking wisdom, there is a lot that we have to not know! In particular we have to know how to not know all that we do know. Our existing knowledge is based on reliance on concepts, on an accumulation of facts and reflections. It can be painful to recognise that it is this very knowledge, this reliance on the contents of our mind, which distracts us from the intrinsic clarity of our ever-present awareness.

Each of us knows many things. What we know is like a wonderful face cream, we rub it in and it makes our skin glow. We rub our knowledge into ourself and it makes our ego feel shiny and competent. But when we find that we have to do some activity we don't understand our shine vanishes and we feel dull and flat. I remember as a child on Sunday evening, trying to do my homework for Monday morning. I was looking at these pages again and again and not understanding anything. Sometimes it would be very, very difficult and I would end up crying. Then I would go and ask my father:

- *Can you help me with this?*
- *Yes, it's not so difficult.*
- *Well, if it's not so difficult, why don't you do it for me?*
- *You have to do it. It is your homework.*
- *But how can I do it when I don't know it?*
- *Well, that's what you are finding out.*

In these moments it is manifest that learning makes us feel stupid before it makes us shine. If we don't have to learn more, we can feel quite confident. Which is why many people don't have any books in their house. You leave school, you don't have to study anymore. Then you can be confident about who you are. But we, the unfortunate ones, have gathered here to learn something new and this is not easy! We need courage, focused attention and patience. We are going to explore how we hide ourselves from ourselves.

Four Noble Truths

Among the first things the Buddha taught were the Four Noble Truths. These are: the fact that there is suffering; the fact that suffering has a cause; the fact that this suffering could come to an end; the fact that there is a way to bring this suffering to an end. Suffering arises because we are blocked in our existence. We want something to be the case, we want something to be so, but it is not.

The Buddha that there are two main kinds of suffering: getting what you don't want and not getting what you do want. Most of our life can be put into these two categories. To be completely present in each moment as it is unfolding requires the exquisite timing of a musician or a dancer. Yet we rarely inhabit that fresh presence. Mostly we inhabit the realm of concepts, of ideas. When we formulate a desire, something that we want, we elaborate a mental image. This mental image then separates off from the context in which it arose and takes on a life of its own. We start to imagine a future and then new ideas arise about its shape: I could do this or this or this or this. So many things are possible! This freedom arises because the future is open. None of us know what will happen. We don't know how long we will live. We don't know if we will be healthy. We don't know if we will be financially secure or not. We don't know if the people close to us will continue to want to be close to us. The future is yet to unfold and so is unknowable, whatever we plan or hope for.

When we develop our plans or imaginings about the future, what they show is not the future itself but the matrix, the basic frame, out of which we imagine our life. The structure of our hopes

and fears shows us our orientation, our bias, our selectivity – a major part of which is our capacity to ignore factors which would cause us distress. If we are not settled in the openness of the present moment, then our thoughts and fantasies about the future will appear to refer to something real and knowable. Our own imagination helps us to fabricate maps which bear little resemblance to the actual immediate terrain we encounter.

Working with circumstances means to be present in each moment and be willing to embrace our life as it unfolds for us. We participate, we mobilise our energy and our effort, and this influences what occurs – but mastery is an illusion. The flow of life is beyond the ego's command. We find ourselves experiencing lack, the sense that something is missing in our life, something that will make us complete. A love story, a particular kind of job, a particular place to live, can provide some amelioration, some softening of the intensity of the lack, but it can't remove its root. The root of the lack is our not being at home in ourselves. Ignoring our own true nature, we find ourselves alienated.

Don't be a leaky bucket

Our nature is here, but we look there. By looking there, we cannot see what is here. This is like a person who goes out on the hill looking for their cow, when the cow is in the barn. We imagine that the external object is going to be able to completely fill us. But our ego self is like a bucket with a hole in it, it is always going to leak no matter how often you fill it up. We like to fall in love and the feeling this generates is like a big stream of water coming into our bucket. But the hole in the bottom of the bucket is still there. As the intensity of our feeling starts to decline, the amount of water coming into the bucket is no longer greater than the amount of water going out of the bucket. So we feel sad, *"Oh, I don't know what's happened, I used to really be in love so much and now I'm getting a bit bored. But there is this new guy at work and he is kind of cute. Maybe he could really fill my bucket..."*

We can spend our whole life looking for new sources of water, but we are avoiding the actual nature of the problem. Having a bucket that leaks as our primary site of identity is not very wise! The path to free ourselves from suffering is the Eightfold Noble Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. Through following this we see that our body and voice and mind are each ungraspable. Therefore, rather than trying to find the perfect shiny object that we need to complete ourselves, we open ourselves to our awareness of how life is when we don't tell it what it is. The appearance of graspable entities arises from our own deluding mental activity. Believing that there are real objects existing apart from my real self, I grasp at them. The frustration this generates is the root of all suffering everywhere.

Hence the freedom we seek is not a freedom to consume the world and grasp more and more shiny things. Rather it is the freedom to open one's heart in compassion, in ethical relatedness to all that occurs. This is infinite freedom, for each being we meet has their own particular shaping, their own particular qualities. To relate to them as they truly are without pulling them into our frames of reference requires that we are undefended, free of self-protection and self-interest so that we are free to become whatever the situation requires. This is very different from thinking, *"I will become whatever is necessary to get my bucket filled."* Abandoning that centripetal focus our open heart is centrifugal, flowing out into the unfolding field of which we are always already a part. The ego is an accountant, always calculating gain and loss, but awareness is simply open and hospitable.

Three kayas

Awareness is the basis of the three modes or kayas of the Buddha's enlightenment. The dharmakaya is the mind of the Buddha, spacious and devoid of constitutive content enlightened. The sambhogakaya is the radiance of the richness of the potential of the Buddha's situation or field of activity. The nirmanakaya is the way in which the Buddha manifests in the world for the sake of others. The dharmakaya is for ourselves, it is all that we need; it is the ending of lack. The two other modes are for the sake of others. If we want to achieve profound satisfaction, peace, completion, we must open ourselves to our own ever-present nature. Our nature, the ground of our being is not dependent on anyone or anything else. Although it has never been lost, it is to be 'found' by being present with oneself. When we are at home in our basic openness we are complete. This is called dzogchen. Freed from need and grasping our energy arises effortlessly for the sake of others. This is enjoyment, not sacrifice.

The mind is infinite. Thoughts are finite. Feelings are finite. Sensations are finite. When we merge into our thoughts, feelings, sensations, we fuse into the limited, the small – and so we feel limited and small. This is what's called 'wandering in samsara'. However if that small particular shape is one that you are manifesting in the moment in order to connect with a particular situation, then the finite nature of this particular shape in this particular moment is inseparable from the infinite openness of the mind within which it moves. This non-duality is the goal of meditation.

But, if the finite shape, that we take on, gets caught as 'my identity' then in that moment of identification there is the forgetfulness of the infinite. The buddhas' middle way avoids all extremes so don't fuse into the moment as if it were the total truth, nor try to push the world away and stand apart from it. The finite and the infinite are inseparable.

The flow of non-dual experience is unceasing yet nothing is established by it. Everything is like an illusion – to grasp at it is a sign of our delusion. Our posture, our breath, the way we speak, our thoughts, all are arising and passing, arising and passing. It is tempting to think that we need to grasp at it and can stabilise ourselves, but this is delusion. Taking an illusion to be real and substantial is to be lost, to wander in our imagination even whilst life's actuality is here with us and as us all the time.

We think and talk ourselves into existence. We create narratives and stories about who we are. This is an auto-intoxication due to which we fall asleep in the dream of language. The paradox is that the more you can describe your experience, the more you can hide your experience. As soon as you learn to speak, you learn to lie. This is the first real freedom that children experience. When they realize that they can say that they didn't do something that they did do, and that their mother believes them – well, this is something momentous!

The gap between what is and what is said establishes a private life, a separation between ourselves and others. It creates our inner world in which I have experience to which you have no direct access. You can only have a mediated access; you're dependent on what I tell you. Now I am the chief, I can put some spice into what I tell you. I can tell you what you want to hear, or I can tell you what you don't want to hear. This generates a sense of control which simultaneously offers freedom and imprisonment: the freedom to manipulate meanings and the prison of the complexity which this generates.

Due to particular causes and circumstances certain propositions appear to be the case. Yet this is not actually true. We believe the proposition because our mind is already tilted and caught up in certain beliefs and in certain distorting factors. Amongst these are the five poisons: stupidity, aversion, desire, jealousy and pride, each of which has many sub-tendencies. When our mind is pervaded by these tendencies it is as if we are looking through distorting glasses. What we see seems to be the case for it is already inflected by our habits, tendencies and so on.

So what can we trust? The tradition says to trust the tradition, trust the teacher. But even here there is some degree of interpretation since we have to make sense of what the teacher is saying. Starting to examine ourselves, to look at who we are, how we are, at what we are up to, is not an easy task. Yet it is very worthwhile, for the tension between looking for truth and then getting lost in illusion gradually puts both activities into question. Relaxing effortful looking allows space for the given actuality of our mind to show itself.

Seeing is direct. Trusting is always at one step removed. Trusting takes us toward the abstract whereas seeing turns us towards this specific moment of revelation. The specific is change. Concrete moments are unrepeatable. It is like when you are walking in the mountains. Every step you take brings you to a slightly different view. Each moment is always the view from 'here' and this 'here' is changing just as this 'now' is changing. This is our exact embodied existence, always positioned somewhere at sometime. We don't have a helicopter to take us up into the sky to see everything. In our abstraction we can imagine that we have just such an overview, but this is just an idea. Our actuality, our embodied being, is always precisely here.

The key point is to see here, to see now – not to imagine them, to construct them out of our assumptions. This means we have to be present at the site of seeing, we have to relax into our open awareness. When we are open and empty, empty of beliefs, habits, projections, there is space to see what is there before we think, before we choose, before we act. Awareness is the ground of our being. Everything else is secondary, is a display, a patterning.