

ZEN MASTER THICH THANH TU

THE HEART SUTRA

LECTURE

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1. THE ROOT OF THE ORIGINAL HEART SUTRA.

1. In the Dependent Origination Sutra, the Buddha taught, “Someone who can comprehend the Law of Dependent Origination will see the Way.” Seeing the Way means seeing reality, the truth.

Dependent Origination creates all dharmas¹.

The Buddha said this is Emptiness.

Phenomena, and all their names, are illusions.

This is the meaning of the Middle Way.

This poem is from the Discourse Sutra.

The Prajna Paramita Sutra contains 600 volumes and its essence is the Heart Sutra². For this reason, all Buddhist practitioners in all of the Zen, Pure Land, and Tantric Schools memorize and chant the Heart Sutra.

2. The Heart Sutra is the sutra³ of wisdom. Maha means great. Prajna means wisdom. Paramita means final or transcendental. Prajna Paramita means the transcendental wisdom⁴. It is not a worldly understanding or wisdom.

3. The law of Dependent Origination appears not only in the Prajna Paramita Sutra, but also in the Avatamsaka Sutra which said, “All phenomena in this world are mutually dependent and interconnected.”

For example: Where did this table come from? Naturally, based on the Law of Dependent Origination, the table came from the combination of a carpenter, wood, plane, chisel, nails, etc. This is the first layer of the Dependent Origination of the table.

¹ Phenomena.

² The Heart Sutra is the core teaching of Buddhism; on which all other teachings of Buddhism are based. “Heart” does not mean a physical heart. Rather, heart in this context means mind.

³ The sutra is the path to be followed in cultivation of the Way, and/or the finger pointing toward the moon (Truth).

⁴ Transcendental here means leaving behind the shore of suffering and reaching the shore of enlightenment and liberation by using the “Prajna” boat to cross the suffering sea.

For the second layer of the Dependent Origination of the table, one may ask where the carpenter, wood, plane, chisel, nails, etc. come from. If the table could be investigated to its source, it would have countless numbers of dependent originations, not just a few layers of dependent origination. Hence, this law is called the Infinite Dependent Origination. If the law of Dependent Origination is true, then what is the relationship between oneself and others?

We have a shirt to wear, a bowl of rice to eat, a means of transportation; these facts indicate that we are connected to an infinite number of people. In this world, every single one of us is indebted to all of the contributions of others. Accordingly, the Avatamsaka Sutra states that Bodhisattvas see the suffering of living beings as their own suffering, and the happiness of living beings as their own happiness. Why is it so? Because no one can be separated from anyone else. Bodhisattvas open their hearts and are grateful to everyone. Since everyone contributes to our comfortable lives, we should respect and appreciate each and everyone of them.

2. THE HEART SUTRA

1. Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva⁵ practiced the profound Prajnaparamita, and thereby perceived that all five skandhas are empty. Thus, Avalokitesvara overcame all suffering and distress.

The goal of practicing Buddhism is to overcome suffering. If we practice Buddhism with this purpose in mind, we can overcome all our suffering. However, although we constantly recite the Heart of the Prajna

⁵ - Bodhisattva: a partially enlightened sentient being who is dedicated to helping other sentient beings become enlightened.

- Avalokitesvara: "one who attains liberation through the practice of contemplation." It also means "one who hears the sounds of suffering sentient beings".

Paramita Sutra (The Heart Sutra) day and night, we may discover that we have not overcome our suffering.

There are three stages in practicing the Prajna Paramita (The Prajna):

- The Prajna as language⁶
- The Prajna as insight
- The Prajna as True Appearance⁷

The language of the Prajna is the written words of the Prajna Sutra. Contemplation and meditation help us develop insight, and lead us to attain Transcendental Wisdom. Realizing the Prajna's True Appearance means realizing the Ultimate Reality of all phenomena.

The Chinese Venerable Thái Hư (The Supreme Emptiness) presented a very skillful simile for Prajna practice. He described a person who only reads and recites the Prajna's text as similar to someone who would like to cross a river, comes to the riverbank, sees a moored boat and borrows it to cross the river. However, once he gets into the boat, he sits passively and does not bother to row or paddle the boat.

Our contemplation and meditation on the Prajna are comparable to our rowing and paddling the boat. We must somehow propel the boat in order to arrive at the other shore. If we simply sit in the boat without rowing it, we will never arrive at the other shore. Someone who practices the Prajna by only reciting it or reading the text is similar. He will never be able to arrive at the shore of peace and liberation.

If we paddle well, the boat will reach the other shore, the shore of Realization of the Prajna's True Appearance, the realization of Transcendental Wisdom.

a. The Practice of Avalokitesvara :

How did she practice and was thereby able to perceive the emptiness of all five Skandhas (Aggregates)?

There are two kinds of hearing:

⁶ Hearing or reading and understanding Prajna with the intellect.

⁷ True Nature or True Mind which is possessed by all beings. Language provides the means by which insight arises, and insight perceives True Appearance.

- Hearing focused on external phenomena (sounds).

- Internal hearing or hearing that focuses on our mind, which means hearing that is turned in the opposite direction (inward), in order to realize our Self-Nature.

“Hearing” in the sutras can mean “focusing one’s attention.” One can hear phenomena with the ears, but also with one’s other sense-organs. This latter kind of hearing examines and is aware of our thoughts, emotions, etc., without attachment. Therefore, our mind remains empty.

Avalokitesvara’s “hearing” describes:

- Her internal “hearing”, and with this hearing she realizes her True Nature. Whenever she “hears” external phenomena, she turns her “hearing” inward and thus does not become attached to any external object. Turning her “hearing” inward, she “perceives that the five aggregates are empty” and thus realizes her True Nature.

- Avalokitesvara used “hearing” as a vehicle for understanding the suffering of all sentient beings and then helped them overcome their suffering.

b. The Hands and Eyes of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion:

Yun Yen asked Tao Wu, “For what reason does the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion use so many hands and eyes?”

Wu said, “It’s like someone who can find a pillow immediately in the dark at midnight.”

Yen said, “I understand.”

Wu said, “What do you understand?”

Yen said, “All over the body are hands and eyes.”

Wu said, “ You have said (understood) quite a bit there, but you’ve only said (realized) eighty percent of it.”

Yen said, “What do you mean, Elder Brother?”

Wu said, “Throughout the body are hands and eyes.”

(Blue Cliff Record – Case 89)

To practice the Prajna Paramita as insight is to see clearly that the true nature of the five aggregates in our body and mind is emptiness. Only then, will we overcome all our suffering and distress.

The five aggregates are form, sensation, perception, mental formation, and consciousness.

1. The Form Aggregate.

Buddha described a human being's physical body as a union of the Four Basic Elements of earth, water, fire and air. The Earth elements in a body are the solid parts such as hair, teeth, nails, skin, flesh, ligaments, bones, etc. The Water elements in a body are the liquid parts such as blood, pus, sweat, saliva, etc. The Air elements in a body are the motion-energy activities such as inhalation and exhalation. The Fire elements in a body are the heat energies.

These Four Basic Elements comprise a body's physical form and characteristics. Are they our "self"?

A body does not have an independent self. It comes into existence dependent upon certain causes and conditions. Thus it is a form aggregate.

2. The Feeling and Sensation Aggregate.

We have six sense organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. These six sense organs come into contact with the six sense objects⁸ to create various physical sensations, feelings and reactions such as happiness, suffering or emotional neutrality.

For example, when our tongue tastes a delicious or distasteful dish, we feel and react. If the taste is agreeable to us, our reaction will be a happy one. If the taste is disagreeable to us, our face crinkles up to express a reaction of distaste, which is a form of suffering. By contrast, when water comes into contact with our tongue,

⁸ The objects of the eyes' seeing are forms, of the ears' hearing are sounds, of the nose's smelling are odors, of the tongue's tasting are flavors, of the body's touching are tactile sensations. The sense objects of the mind-consciousness are perceptions, ideas, thoughts, etc.

we normally experience neither a feeling of happiness nor a feeling of suffering. This response is called emotional neutrality.

Does a feeling of happiness or suffering occur in this example at the tongue or do such feelings depend upon the addition of something else? There must be food touching the tongue, and then the mind consciousness must act to differentiate the taste. Thus there must be the interaction of three elements: the sense organs, the sense objects, the sense consciousness and mind consciousness, in order to characterize whether a dish is delicious, distasteful or neither. Feelings arise as reactions to this collection of three components. Are these feelings permanent? If something does not manifest or come into existence until all the causes and conditions for its existence have combined, then it is impermanent; therefore its true nature is emptiness. This is the feeling and sensation aggregate⁹.

3. The Perception Aggregate

We often say, “I recall ...” when we refer to the past. To recall means to remember something or bring something back into the mind from the past. What we recall is not the reality of the past, but our perceptions of the past. When we imagine the future, our perceptions or imaginings of it are unreal.

Perceptions also exist in the present. Do we perceive the present correctly? For example, seeing a rope on a night walk, we might perceive it as a snake.

Are our perceptions consistent with reality? All our perceptions are incorrect and therefore, deceptive. Perceptions exist because we are pursuing the past, losing ourself in the future, or misinterpreting the present. Because these causes and conditions give rise to our perceptions, all perceptions are impermanent. This is the perception aggregate.

⁹ See the story “The Girl With A Rose”.

Story

The Girl With A Rose

During World War II, a young man named John Blanchard went to the library in Florida and took out a book to read. Inside the cover, he found the notes written by a woman named Hollis Maynell with her address. Through her interesting and appealing notes, he felt that the woman was intelligent, profound and kind. He decided to write to her to introduce himself. The following day later he was drafted to the army, and was sent oversea. He and Hollis wrote to each other until his return from the war. Eventually, they decided to meet at a train station in New York City. They agreed that Hollis would wear a rose on her coat so that John would recognize her and he was to carry a book.

When the train stopped, many passengers descended from the train. John's eyes searched eagerly for a young woman with a rose. A young and beautiful woman with blond hair and green eyes wearing a green coat passed him on the platform and smiled at him. He felt instantly that she must be Hollis and although she was not wearing a rose, he approached her. She asked him: "Would you like to join me?" John was thrilled and followed her briefly, but suddenly he noticed another woman on the platform, who did wear a rose. This woman was older, heavy, homely and her hair was gray. John hesitated, not knowing what to do. He did not wish to lose the beautiful young woman but he had made a commitment to meet the woman with the rose, with whom he had formed a friendship through their year-long correspondence.

John walked away from the beautiful young woman and approached the woman with the rose. When he reached her, he said, "I am John Blanchard. May I ask if you are Hollis, and could I invite you to dinner?" The woman smiled warmly and said, "A young woman wearing a green coat gave me this rose to wear. She told me if you approached me and invited me to dinner, she would meet you at the restaurant across the street from the station."

Conclusion:

a. The story demonstrates the intelligence of the young woman and her realization that the true nature of our heart is best revealed under unpleasant or difficult circumstances.

b. When John saw the young woman, he was immediately attracted by her beautiful face and appearance, because John had imagined his friend as a young and beautiful woman. Unfortunately, he is so deluded that he doesn't see the fact (reality) that the young woman is not wearing a rose.

c. John's eyes are attached to the eye-object, which is the young woman. Therefore, he follows her. But a while later, when he sees the rose on the coat of another woman, he awakens to the fact that the rose represents his friend. He feels a conflict between his two contradictory thoughts and wishes - one, to follow the rose, "a symbol of the friendship which had meant so much to him during the war" - or two, he desires to follow the meaningless form of an unknown woman.

4. Mental formations or Volition Aggregate.

A mental formation is an activity of the mind. Our thoughts are mental formations. They are constantly arising and disappearing. For example, before going to the market, we think about preparing a shopping list - soybeans, milk, and three or four other items. The constant flow of our thoughts from soybeans to milk and all the other things we plan to buy is called our mental formations. These thoughts depend upon certain causes and conditions, and because of these dependent variables, mental formations are impermanent. That is the mental formations aggregate.

Another definition of this aggregate is volition or will, which means our decision to act in certain ways or do certain things such as to go to the market to buy food. Therefore, volition or will is one of our mental formations which is linked to our previous thoughts concerning our wishes or desires for something

5. Consciousness Aggregate.

Consciousness is the ability to differentiate and discriminate one thing from another.

Our eyes see colors and our eye-consciousness discriminates between them, seeing them as beautiful or ugly; our ears listen to sounds and our ear-consciousness discriminates between sounds, hearing them as either wonderful or horrible; our nose smells scents and our nose-consciousness discriminates between scents as either fragrant or smelly; our tongue tastes flavors and our tongue-consciousness discriminates between flavors, experiencing them as tasty or not tasty; our body comes into contact with objects and our body-consciousness discriminates between such phenomena as either cold or hot pleasant or unpleasant,.

Clearly, these differentiations and discriminations exist only when the sensory organs come into contact with sensory objects. This contact creates consciousness. Since these contacts arise from causes and conditions that are always changing, consciousness is impermanent.

To differentiate means to perceive the objective differences between various phenomena, such as the difference between red and yellow or tree and house, for example. There is no attachment and no-self involved when we differentiate, and we are aware of phenomena as they are.

By contrast, to discriminate means not only to perceive the difference between various phenomena but to react subjectively to these differences with emotions, judgments and preferences. Our discriminations arise from our attachments and our illusion of a personal self.

That is the consciousness aggregate.

There are Eight Layers of Consciousness in our mind: the Five Sense consciousnesses of eye, ear, nose, tongue and body; Mind consciousness; Ego consciousness; and Store consciousness.

When the five sense organs come into contact with the five objects, Five Sense consciousnesses are initiated in two ways:

With the participation of the Mind Consciousness and Ego consciousness. There is differentiating and discriminating things. This process creates the reactions of our body, speech and mind.

These reactions create good or bad karma because of the intrusion of our Ego into the process.

Without the participation of the Mind Consciousness and Ego consciousness. As a result, there is only the activation of the differentiating process which recognizes the “suchness” nature of phenomena. The process of discrimination does not arise. Even though we do react with our body, speech and mind, we do not create good or bad Karma, because our Ego is not present in this process. In other words, all our actions derive from Empty Mind! See the two Soldier’s Stories.

In short, our five aggregates clearly are impermanent and unreal. Their existence depends upon certain causes and conditions, and their true nature is emptiness. In the Discourses Sutra, the Buddha said, “A body has no self.” Here, “no self” means “no independent self.” A body and mind is a compilation of the five aggregates; that is why it does not have an independent self. Without an independent self, it is called “no self”. The Heart of the Prajna Paramita Sutra does not state that a body and mind is comprised of the five aggregates and therefore it has no self; instead, it states that every aggregate has no self.

If we view our body as impermanent and unreal, we will feel no joy when someone praises it; we will feel no sorrow when someone criticizes it, and no anger when someone insults it. If we realize that our “five aggregates” body and mind is not a permanent thing, and its true nature is that of emptiness, then we will overcome all our suffering and distress. Our body and mind are a combination of the five aggregates and has no independent self; hence our body is called a “non-self”, and once we fully realize this, we are no longer attached to our self.

Stories

A Soldier's Story -1

Following two years in the U.S. Army, during which time he fought in the Vietnam war, an American soldier returned home to the States. He arrived in San Francisco, and phoned his parents to announce his return. During their conversation, the soldier asked his parents if he could bring home with him a soldier friend. His parents readily agreed, and assured him they would look forward to meeting his friend. Then the soldier said, "Mom and Dad, my friend is handicapped. He lost his arm and a leg in the war. He has no place to live or anyone who wants to take care of him or live with him. I'd like my friend to live with us. Would you be willing to share our home with him?" "Oh," replied his parents, "We are very sorry to hear about your friend's difficulties, and we would be glad to help him find another place to live." The soldier replied, "But I want my friend to live with us." His father said, "My son, do you know what you are asking us to do? A handicapped person like your friend will be a heavy burden for the whole family. We have our own lives. We cannot allow anything like this to disrupt our lives so severely. It would be better for you to come home and forget about your friend. He'll soon find his own solutions."

The soldier immediately hung up the phone without saying another word. A few days later, his parents received a phonecall from the San Francisco police, with the news that their son had jumped or fallen from a tall building and was dead. The police suspected suicide. Distraught, the soldier's parents traveled immediately to San Francisco and the funeral home where their son lay in death. Their first glimpse of him left them horrified and overcome with grief: their son was missing an arm and a leg!

Questions:

How does this story illustrate ego? Whose ego?

2. What motivated the parents to refuse to take on the responsibility for their son's friend? Were their egos involved in their decisions?
3. What motivated the soldier to commit suicide? Was his ego involved in his act of suicide?

Commentary:

1. Ego is involved in the responses of both the parents and the soldier, in this story.

2. We do not know the precise reasons why the soldier's parents refused to take on the responsibility of their son's disabled friend. Perhaps the parents had:

a) Their own health problems;

b) Heavy financial burdens;

c) Psychological difficulties which made it difficult for them to tolerate additional responsibilities;

d) Limited capacity for empathy, etc. To assume responsibility for the handicapped soldier (a stranger) could require unusual physical, psychological and spiritual strength and generosity, which the soldier's parents might have realized they did not possess for a stranger. It is possible that the parents would have been willing, and could have found the strength to provide for their disabled son, while being unable or unwilling to provide for his friend, a stranger.

3. The soldier apparently felt that his parents' refusal to take on the responsibility for his fictional disabled friend meant that his parents did not wish to assume responsibility for their own disabled son. This might or might not have been true, but apparently the soldier interpreted his parents rejection of his friend as a rejection of himself. Did this presumed rejection trigger in the soldier feelings such as self-hatred, despair and/or rage against himself and his parents? Did he kill himself :

a) Because the presumed rejection was interpreted as proof that his parents did not love him;

b) Because their presumed rejection of the soldier created in him an anger which he turned against himself;

c) He wished to punish himself for being unloveable; and/or

d) He wished to punish his parents for "rejecting" him, and not meeting his expectations?

Whatever the soldiers' motivation(s) for suicide, the act may have contained elements of vindictiveness against his parents. The soldier most likely was aware that his parents would suffer deeply because of his suicide.

Whatever created within the soldier the compelling desire to kill himself, his sense of extreme pain can be presumed, a pain that most likely contained elements of depression, despair, horror at and non-acceptance of his own physical condition, deep disappointment with his parents, a sense of rejection, and fury at life for treating him badly. He had just returned, disabled, from a war zone, and might well have been suffering the psychological scars of war, in addition to everything else.

A Soldier's Story - 2

One evening on a road in Brooklyn, there walked a thin, sickly old man. Suddenly, he fell down and people gathered around him. Concerned for him, they transported him to Kings' County Hospital, where he became unconscious. Occasionally he awoke, and speaking with difficulty, expressed the wish to see his son. After speaking, he would again fall into unconsciousness.

An emergency room nurse found a crumpled letter in the pocket of his discarded clothes. The letter was disintegrating with age, and with the constant, affectionate attention given to it by the old man. The letter revealed that his son was a soldier stationed at a military base in the Carolinas. The hospital staff immediately contacted an officer at the base, who located the old man's son, and had him taken, on an urgent basis, to the airport where he boarded a plane for New York.

The soldier was tired from his training, and very anxious about his father. On arrival in New York he went straight to the hospital where a nurse led him to his father's bedside. The nurse said to the old man, "Your son is here." The old man opened his eyes, now barely able to see, and looked toward the soldier standing by his bed. The old man's dry and wrinkled face lit up with happiness, and he tried to speak but could not. He reached out his hand toward the soldier, who took the old man's hand in his own and clasped it tightly. All night the soldier sat by his father, unsleeping. The nurse asked him to leave but he refused.

He whispered, now and then, into his father's ear, and each time, the old man smiled.

At dawn he died, and for the first time, the soldier released the old man's hand and laid it gently on the bed. Then the soldier went out in the hall to smoke, and the nurse approached him, wishing to console him. But the soldier spoke first. "Who was the old man?", he asked. The nurse was stunned. "He was not your father?" The soldier replied, "I never saw him before yesterday." The nurse asked, "Why didn't you tell me this when you first saw him?" The soldier replied, "I knew immediately there was some mistake, but I saw that the old man was dying. So I thought I could do something for him, not reveal the mistake, and stay with him until he died."

Two days later, the true son of the old man came to New York to say goodbye to his father. The mystery of mistaken identity was unraveled: Two soldiers at the same base in the Carolinas had the same name.

Commentary:

The kindness of the soldier for the old man is egoless. By contrast, in *The Story of a Soldier - No. 1*, the reactions and actions of the soldier's parents (and the soldier?) express ego.

2. Sàriputra, form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

To illustrate the meaning of the Prajna Paramita, let us use the example of our fist. A fist has a form ; therefore, we call the fist a form. The form is comprised of five curled-up fingers. Because the fist is composed of the elements of five fingers, we see that the fist is a composite of separate elements, parts, and causes. Therefore the fist is empty of separate self. Thus, its true nature is emptiness. Since the fist is a form, and the form of the fist is empty of a separate self, the Sutra affirms that *Form is Emptiness*.

Emptiness doesn't mean nothingness; it means empty of a separate self. The fist does not have a separate self; therefore

we say it is empty. But the fist does have an existence or form as a result of being a collection of causes and effects.

This illustrates that *Emptiness is Form*. Emptiness does not imply “nothing” versus “something”. Because a form’s true nature is emptiness, and causes and effects create forms, the Sutra affirms that *Form is Emptiness and Emptiness is Form*.

A. Theory:

In lesson 2, 3 and 4 we have talked about Emptiness, which is the True Nature of our body and mind and of all phenomena. When there are favorable or unfavorable conditions and causes in this Emptiness, phenomena arise; and all phenomena have Form. This Form is not only the Form Aggregate, but the four other aggregates have Forms as well. That is the content of lesson 5. Emptiness is True Nature and Form is Phenomena.

We can use a coin as a metaphor to illustrate the statement of the Sutra that says “Form is Emptiness” A coin has two sides as do all phenomena. One side of the coin represents a Thing, and the other side represents Nothing. Nothing is the reverse of Thing. Thing and Nothing are conditional and therefore are impermanent.

But Emptiness is not Nothing, except when there are no causes or conditions, Emptiness takes form when there are conditions, and in the Emptiness these forms are both Thing and Nothing. Emptiness is always there whether there are conditions or not. Thus, Emptiness is permanent.

Another example: The basic property of water (H₂O) is “wetness” This property doesn’t change under any condition: Whether H₂O is liquid (water), solid (ice) or gas (vapor), wetness remains the True Nature of water, and the liquid, solid or gas conditions (Forms) of the water are impermanent.

We study the theories set forth in the Prajna Paramita by listening, reading and pondering this Sutra, and as follows is:

B- Practice:

We should practice and involve ourselves in spiritual training as follow:

1. The first practice is on the cushion, in sitting meditation, during which:

- You watch your mind. When any thought arises, let it go. Don't follow it, don't become attached to it.

- Remind yourself to "empty" your mind during meditation.

2. The second practice is in daily life (in all our activities and actions). During this practice:

- Concentrate your mind on the object in front of you. Let go of all other thoughts.

- Empty your mind of all thoughts about the past and the future.

3. The third practice is:

- Familiarizing yourself with the true meaning of "space" so that you can live "with" a sense of space, instead of living only with a focus on things, as you habitually do.

- Seeing the empty nature of all phenomena (including yourself, others, and the entire cosmos ...) even when engaged in such mundane activities as cooking, driving, etc. In doing so, you recognize the True Nature of all phenomena.

Causes and effects comprise everything that exists. Nothing has a separate self. Thus the true nature of everything is emptiness, and everything is not permanent. Our body is not real nor permanent; the environment is also not real, not permanent; so, suffering is, as a result, also not real and not permanent.

We learned that all forms manifest from causes and effects; thus they are empty.

In the Diamond Sutra, the Buddha taught, "Where there is form, there is illusion. The one who can see a form as not a form sees the Tathagata." Why? Because, being able to see the existence of forms as compilations of causes and effects indicates the ability to see the Dharma's true nature; and therefore the ability to see the Buddha. Seeing the Buddha implies realizing the true nature of oneself (the Buddha-nature), and the true nature of all forms (phenomena). Seeing the Buddha does not mean seeing any particular Buddha such as Sakyamuni Buddha or Amitabha Buddha, etc.

Once we can comprehend that our body is an impermanent form, and everything else is also impermanent, we will no longer worry about our body or anything else. We will then be able to chant the Amitabha Buddha's name with a one-pointed mind, and meditate with full concentration. Prajna Paramita is the wisdom that can guide the practitioner to enter the Way. That is why all Buddhist practitioners regardless of their traditions must recite the Heart Sutra daily.

3. Sariputra, the empty nature of all phenomena does not come into being nor does it cease to be. It is neither pure nor impure, neither increasing nor decreasing. Therefore, in the empty nature there is neither form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor mental formations, nor consciousness. There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no mental object; no eye realm and so forth as well as no realm of mind consciousness.

If a table occupies a space, in that space there is a thing (form or phenomenon) in that space. If the table is removed, there is nothing (or no-thing) in that space. In the same way, all phenomena come into being (make their appearance in space) and eventually disappear. Thing becomes no-thing; no-thing becomes thing. This is the perpetual process of change (impermanence) which occurs as a result of causes and conditions.

The empty nature of all phenomena (forms) does not change, neither increasing nor decreasing, neither being born nor dying. The empty nature of all phenomena is neither pure nor impure. Emptiness or Empty nature is the True Nature of all phenomena. Phenomena come into being when conditions are appropriate or suitable. The nature of such phenomena or forms is always empty. The empty nature of all phenomena cannot be seen with the naked eye; it can only be realized with transcendental wisdom. What we see with our naked eyes are forms that

are constantly changing and are constantly being born and dying.

Zen master Tung-shan, the patriarch of Soto Chinese Zen Buddhism, was ordained at a very young age. Every night he went to the Buddha Hall to recite the Sutra. One night, after reciting the Sutra, he went to his master and asked, "Respected master, I have eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. Why does the Sutra tell me I have no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, and no mind?" His master could not answer him and directed him to go to the south and find other Zen masters who might answer his question.¹⁰

In Buddhism, eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind are the six sensory organs. These six come into contact with form, sound, smell, taste, tactile objects and mental phenomena (six sensory objects). The six sensory organs (inside of sentient beings), the six sensory objects (outside of sentient beings), plus the six sense consciousnesses make up the eighteen realms of the senses. Body, mind and the external world comprise the eighteen realms.

The True Nature of the eighteen realms is Emptiness. The empty nature is the ultimate reality. The laws of cause and effect give rise to the formation of human beings and all other phenomena. Anything that is a result of causes and effects has the empty nature or True Nature.

There is no ignorance and also no extinction of ignorance, and so forth even up to no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death. There is no suffering, no origin of suffering, no cessation of suffering, and no path.

The Twelve Links of Interdependent Origin function as follows:

¹⁰ Subsequently Tung-shan found another teacher. This story illustrates the persistence of Tung-shan in his quest to fully realize the meaning of the Heart Sutra. This Sutra cannot be realised without profound commitment to meditation practice. Through his dedicated practice Tung-shan became a preeminent Zen master.

Because there is ignorance, there are mental formations; because there are mental formations, there is consciousness; because there is consciousness, there is the name-form; because there is the name-form, there are the six senses; because there are the six senses, there is contact; because there is contact, there is feeling; because there is feeling, there is craving; because there is craving, there is grasping; because there is grasping, there is becoming; because there is becoming, there is birth; and because there is birth, there is old age and death.

This is the Existence Cycle of Interdependent Origin. If however we examine carefully the True Nature of Emptiness, we see that there is no ignorance and so forth even up to no birth, aging, sickness, and death. This is revealed in the Interdependent Origin's "extinction cycle" as follows: With the fading away of ignorance, mental formations cease; with the fading away of mental formations, consciousness ceases; ...and so forth even up to the fading away of birth, old age, sickness, and death. If in the True Nature of Emptiness there is no ignorance, there can be no extinction of ignorance. The True Nature of Emptiness, thus, is neither the Existence Cycle of the Twelve Links, nor the Extinction Cycle of the Twelve Links of Interdependent Origin.

Because, the True Nature of Emptiness is not a formation or a material object, it cannot exist or become extinct.

The Buddha sees how much living beings suffer from their illusions; thus He presents various methods of practice by means of which living beings may put an end to their illusions. Putting an end to our illusions terminates all our suffering. Buddha is like a physician who knows a patient is in pain and gives the proper medicine to cure the patient's illness. When the illness and the pain are terminated, the medicine is no longer required. If the illness is temporary, should we use the medicine permanently? If the illness were permanent, how could the medicine help to restore the person back to health? Because the illness is not permanent, the medicine can abolish the illness. The medicine is produced because the

illness exists. The medicine can be discarded when the illness is cured.

The sixth Patriarch revealed this idea in the following statement, “The Buddha established all Dharmas to cure all minds; I empty my mind; thus I have no need for any Dharma.”

All illness and suffering are the result of causes and effects and are impermanent; the medicine (the Dharma) that treats it is also the result of causes and effects and is also impermanent. The Twelve Links of Interdependent Origin are also the consequences of causes and effects, and are not permanent.

If we can comprehend the Twelve Links of Interdependent Origin, we can understand this section of the Heart Sutra.

The Pratyeka Buddhas study and contemplate the principles of the Twelve Links of Conditioned Arising in order to extinguish birth-and-death. The Shravakas study and contemplate the principles of the Four Noble Truths for the same reason.

The Twelve Links of Conditioned Arising:

The twelve links are: (1) fundamental ignorance - (2) action (to do something and/or the impulse to be reborn) - (3) consciousness - (4) name-and-form - (5) the six sense faculties or six entries - (6) contact - (7) sensation - (8) desire - (9) grasping - (10) coming into existence - (11) birth - (12) old age and death.

Our Previous Lives:

(1) - (2) - (3). Our ignorance and actions in our past lives generate our consciousness which determines our future lives¹¹.

Our life in a womb before birth.

It is characterized by the following links: (4) - (5) - (6) - (7) - (8) - (9) - (10). In (4) “name” refers to the mental aspect,

¹¹ Between the time of our death and our rebirth is approximately forty-nine days during which our consciousness undergoes certain changes. At our death our consciousness, which had eight layers during our lifetime, becomes one consciousness. This one consciousness determines our name-and-form in the next life.

and “form” refers to the physical aspect of our existence – the body.

As the embryo develops, it forms the six sense faculties, which allow it to respond to the environment before and after we are born.

Our life after birth:

(11) - (12). When the six entries begin to fully function, at birth we create Karma. As long as there is consciousness, we create Karma and its consequences. The functioning of the six entries leads to contact with the environment. This contact leads to sensation, the experience of pleasure and pain, which leads to desire, including craving or greed, and hatred or anger. When one craves something one grasps for it. When one hates something, one tries to reject or escape it. As a result of our craving or hatred, and our grasping and rejecting, we create our future lives.

None of these 12 links can exist by itself. Each link relies on the existence of all the others.

Our life in the womb and after birth arises because of our previous lives, each lifetime leading to another, until the chain of Karma is broken. To break our Karmic chain we must understand and contemplate the causes and conditions that have created our Karma.

1. The meaning of the 12 Links:

In the Agamas it is written, "This arises; hence that arises" and "This perishes; hence that perishes". Our lack of awareness causes us suffering and leads us to create Karma after which we must suffer the consequences of our Karma. So, we suffer more and create more Karma, and the cycle continues. This is called the transmigration of birth and death, or the twelve links of conditioned arising.

If we are not ignorant, we do not create Karma. We are no longer ignorant when our seeing, hearing, etc. "leave no trace" (are without attachment), and our mind is empty. Without Karma there are no consequences, and if there are no consequences we do not suffer. If the cycle of Karmic creation and consequence can be broken, we will be liberated from Samsara and birth and death.

2. The meaning of Fundamental Ignorance.

Fundamental ignorance is the source of our suffering.

Our attachments, and our misunderstanding of who we are; our belief in an “I” (a self) are expressions of fundamental ignorance.¹² Our attachment to and misunderstanding of “I” lead to the desire to gratify the “I”, and so we begin a fruitless and endless search for the permanent gratification of our desires. Of course the seed of fundamental ignorance is the residue of Karma that we created in our past lives. This seed survives in our present life, but will grow and ripen only under favorable or appropriate conditions, as follows:

When causes and conditions ripen to bring a subject (six sense organs) in contact with an object (six sense objects), if we are not aware (that is we let our mind-consciousness and ego-consciousness interfere) we will be attached to this object. And from that attachment, the three poisons will arise. Greed and/or anger arise first and then folly (foolish thoughts and actions). This folly causes us to misunderstand the true nature of things. These three poisons will lead us to suffering. On the other hand, if we have no attachment, we do away with our suffering, and our fundamental ignorance will cease to exist.

3. The meaning and contemplation of Action.

The state of our mind is revealed in thoughts, words and deeds, and these are called Karmic actions. Every action causes an energy that is implanted in us as Karmic seed. The aggregate of these energies thus accumulated is also called Karma, or Karmic force. It never becomes extinct until it has produced a result.

¹² Suppose a man gets up early while it is still dark, and on the way to the bathroom he stumbles against a water jar on the ground and breaks it. “How clumsy of me!”, he says and his wife replies: “It was not your fault, I ought to have put the jar away.” There is no foolish complaining because each side is looking at its own fault.

But we don’t usually behave that well, instead attacking the other party by saying: “Who is the fool who left that here in the dark?” And the retort comes back: “Who is it that goes blundering about and then complains?”, and the fight is on. All the time we try to make ourselves out to be right. This is the sin of folly.

Contemplation of our three Karmic actions is practiced as follow:

- We should try at all times to be aware of what we are doing. This is called “action purification” as expressed in the Sutra of Buddha’s Advice to Rahula¹³.

- We should try to be aware of the present moment and not let mind-consciousness and ego-consciousness interfere in our action.

4. The meaning and contemplation of consciousness.

The third link, consciousness, refers to the mind-consciousness (See lesson 4). Consciousness exists because of attachment to self.

5. The meaning and contemplation of Desire, Grasping, Coming into existence, Birth-old age-and death.

It is through the existence of this very desire and grasping, the gradual recognition of the true character of this desire and grasping, that we can come to discover release. Having discovered it, we continue to practice with dedication and faith in our Buddha nature. This is the spirit of the Bodhisattva.

¹³ Buddha said to Rahula:

“Use your thoughts, words, and deeds as a mirror.

- **Before** you act, try to anticipate the results of the action. If you see that they would be harmful to yourself or to others, you shouldn’t follow through with the action. If you foresee no harm, you could go ahead and act.

- And if, **in the course of acting**, you see it causing unexpected harm, you should stop the action. If you see no harm in it, you may continue.

- If, **after you act**, you see long-term harm resulting from the action, you should consult with another person on the path to gain perspective on what you have done – and how not to do it again – and then resolve not to repeat the mistake. If on the other hand, you see no harm resulting from an action, you should rejoice in your progress in the practice and continue with your training.”

Stories

I don't buy this Karma business

"I don't buy this Karma business", said the young man from the university. "It's irrational! How could we be influenced in this life by the mistakes of our past lives? I don't even believe in reincarnation."

"Start here," said the Zen teacher. "Consider that every morning you wake up a new person. You go to bed, you sleep, and you wake up and start the rest of your life all over again. You have unlimited choices of what you want to do and who you want to be on that day.

"However, all the conditioning and influences of your life before that morning help determine what you will do and who you will be. So too with Karma".

"So... ?"

"So maybe consider this alone: Work a little harder at being more compassionate every day."

"And... ?"

"And may be you won't come back as a poor Zen teacher trying to help a bright young man with a blocked mind."

In The Nursing Home

The aged ailing woman complained to her best friend,

"I hate being old. I hate being here in this rest home."

"Let's be positive," began the friend.

"Positive about what? Damn it."

"Well, are you in pain?"

"No."

"Remember how wonderful you felt when the pain finally went away? Was that pleasurable?"

"Yes."

"Consider that the same pleasure is with you now."

“But it’s all so horrible here. The food...”

“How was lunch?” asked the best friend.

“Terrible!”

“Totally terrible? Yet you ate it all.”

“It was all I had. I had no choice,” said the sick woman.

“What one thing was okay?”

“The whipped cream on top of the fruit salad.”

“Fine, start there. Think about the whipped cream.”

“This talk is all Pollyanna, so phony optimistic.”

“Again, tell me why you ate all your lunch?,” asked the best friend.

“Because, damn it, that was all I had.”

“That’s what I’m trying to say, honey.”

The Great Katzu of Ryuho

In the seven month of the first year of Kowa(1381), which was thirty-three years after the death of Hatayama Michichika (who had been in charge of military affairs for the whole Kanto area), a memorial service was held for him. The people assembled at Hozikan (the Zen temple Choji), and among them Hatayama Sukemichi came in a palanquin. He saluted priest Ryuho, the 13th master there, and asked him about memorial service. The teacher told him: “A memorial service after forty-nine days is laid out in the sutras. The service after 100 days, one year and three years, derive from traditions in China. The thirteenth year and thirty-third services were inaugurated when the son of Councillor Nobunishi first had these ceremonies performed out of filial devotion for his father. Memorial services after fifty years and a hundred years and so on are performed in the temples of both Japan and China.”

Sukemichi asked: “If someone makes a vow to perform the ceremony but does not carry it out, will the spirit of the death suffer?”

The teacher replied: "The services are to remind the descendants of the virtues of the deceased; as an expression of their devotion, they pray for his welfare.

«But the pain or happiness of the spirit of the deceased is according to his karma, so the sutras declare. But it must be said that for a follower of Zen, there is some thing more apart from this.»

The pupil persisted in asking that the teacher should declare it, and finally the master glared at him and gave a great Katzū! shout, whereupon he swooned and lost consciousness. After some time the teacher gave another shout and Sukemichi revived

The teacher said: “Well, how are they, the happiness and pains of the departed? What you have experienced for yourself, you do not need others to tell you.”

The pupil bowed with gratitude and said: “In all my seventy-two years it is only now that I have come to know the real meaning of the shout which the Zen priest gives before the coffin at the funeral service.”

But ability to kill and revive by a shout is not prized in Zen. The Zen practice of the shout is quite different from that of the warriors. The Zen shout is the spiritual realization of the Diamond King's sword, which by one shout has to be a means to resolve ignorance and open up realization. It has to be spiritually effective in changing by a single shout the six paths and the four kinds of birth into Buddhahood. This is the difference between the Zen practices of Katzū! and the kiai shout of the warriors.

*

The Four Noble Truths are another Dharma the Buddha developed to cure the mind's illness. After the Buddha was enlightened under the Bodhi tree, for the following seven days He considered whether or not. He should share the Dharma with the world. Why did He hesitate? He did so because the Dharma was radically different from the views held by ordinary human beings. Would they understand what He could teach them?

At that very moment, a celestial being (Brahma Deva) appeared and said:

- Honored One, you are completely enlightened. And you should use the Dharma to educate human beings.

The Buddha replied:

- The Dharma is very profound. Ordinary human beings who hear these teachings will not fully comprehend them.

The Deva said:

- Honored One, in this world there are human beings who have capacity and conditions favorable to receiving your teachings. They can understand and practice them. Therefore with skillful means you can educate human beings.

The Buddha accepted the Deva's request. The Buddha then went to find Kaundinya's five brothers in Deer Park and preached the Four Noble Truths.

The Buddha realized ultimate reality and ultimate truth and therefore saw and understood all things as they truly are. We, on the other hand, see everything through the distorting lense of our illusions. We do not see or realize reality. As a result, great suffering arises in us, because illusions cause suffering. The Buddha taught, "Every living thing suffers", and He identified the innumerable kinds of suffering and distress that afflict us. Because we live in a state of illusion, we are trapped endlessly in the cycle of birth and death. The Agamas Sutra describes the Four Noble Truths: Suffering, the Origin of Suffering, the Cessation of Suffering, and the Path. From the perspective of the Heart Sutra however the Four Noble Truths are relative truths and not permanent reality.

The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths so that human beings might learn to cure the illness of their illusions. When illness is cured, then the medicine must also be discarded. The Four Noble Truths have the True Nature of Emptiness and are impermanent. In fact, Suffering is not permanent, the Origin of Suffering is impermanent, the Cessation of Suffering is not permanent, and the Path is impermanent.

The 4 Noble Truths are: 1/The Noble Truth of Suffering; 2/The Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering; 3/The Noble

Truth of the Cessation of Suffering; 4/The Noble Truth of the Path that leads to the Cessation of Suffering.

These four noble truths show us not only the nature of our present life in its entirety, but also the possibility of moving beyond this very limited existence into an existence that is free from suffering and its cause.

1. Suffering:

We all have an instinctive wish to be happy and to avoid suffering. But we do not realize that our suffering is ultimately caused by the actions of our body, speech and mind. All our actions, whether good or bad, create Karma. When this Karma confronts appropriate conditions, we experience the consequences of our Karma. Therefore, our suffering is not accidental, random, or without cause. Our happiness is also ultimately caused by our own actions of body, speech and mind. Good actions create positive Karma, which “ripens” into experiences that are positive and happy, when the conditions are appropriate. Ultimate or true happiness has nothing to do with temporary sense pleasures but refers to the higher states of happiness – the happiness that remains unaffected despite changing external circumstances. We can achieve the cessation of suffering by following the path that leads to the highest form of happiness.

The Eight types of suffering are: 1/The suffering of birth; 2/The suffering of old age; 3/The suffering of illness; 4./The suffering of death; 5/The suffering of encountering what is unpleasant; 6/ The suffering of separation from what is pleasant; 7/The suffering of not getting what we want; 8/The suffering of the five aggregates¹⁴.

¹⁴ This suffering is caused when the five aggregates (Form, Feeling and Sensation, Perception, Mental Formations or Volition, Consciousness) are extreme (for example, a body that is too heavy, feelings that are excessive, sensations that are hyper-reactive, perceptions that are distorted, mental formations not based in reality, volition that is selfish, and consciousness that is overly sensitive, egotistical, or unaware.)

2. The Origin of Suffering :

Our suffering is a result of our Karma. Our Karma is the result of our fundamental ignorance. No matter what form our suffering takes, its ultimate origin lies in our ignorance. This ignorance is our fundamental confusion about the nature of reality, about how things actually exist.

Our fundamental ignorance leads to the creation of our afflictive emotions – attachment and aversion – which in turn lead us to create karmic actions and suffering. Delusion is a blanket term for the combination of ignorance and the afflictive emotions of attachment and aversion. Through the interaction of ignorance, afflictive emotions, and karmic actions, we experience suffering. However, we need a high degree of awareness to appreciate this sequence.

3. The Cessation of Suffering

The meaning of Cessation:

True cessation is not the process of ending suffering; true cessation is a state of complete realization. It means having completely terminated emotional afflictions and having fully realized the path; it is liberation from the causes and the effects of suffering, and it is a state where there are no more Karmic causes and consequences that keep us in samsara, the cycle of birth and death.

Realizing the Nature of Emptiness

True cessation is fully realizing the nature of emptiness and liberating oneself from the cycle of birth and death. How does one fully realize the nature of emptiness? To understand emptiness we should first understand how causes and conditions interact. Phenomena come into being through “conditioned arising”, the coming together of causes and conditions mutually influencing each other. Everything is in constant flux; nothing remains the same, one instant to the next. From this process all phenomena arise, deteriorate, and eventually cease.

Since everything is in flux, without a permanent nature or identity, there can be no separate, identifiable “self”. We call this quality of selflessness in phenomena “emptiness”. This emptiness of substantial reality we call “no-self”.

Those who realize the nature of emptiness also realize their Buddha-nature. To deeply and fully realize Buddha-nature is to become an arhat, a noble one who has attained cessation. The four characteristics of an arhat are:

- all defilements have been purified,
- all that needs to be done has been done,
- all future rebirths have been exhausted, and
- liberation from karma and its consequences has been achieved.

This is realizing the true nature of emptiness.

Nirvana

Nirvana in Sanskrit means ‘extinction quiescence’. Extinction is the complete cessation of suffering and the termination of the samsaric cycle. Quiescence means that fundamental ignorance and its vexations¹⁵ have been eradicated and permanently extinguished.

There are two levels of Nirvana: Nirvana with remainder¹⁶ and Nirvana without remainder¹⁷. An arhat who has realized Nirvana with remainder has been liberated from all mental defilements but the “Karmic body” still remains. The body is still subject to the misfortunes that can befall a body, but this body does not have the ordinary person’s suffering.

¹⁵ Vexations (klesas): passions, defilements, troubles – subtle mental and spiritual sufferings.

¹⁶ The cause but not all the effects of reincarnation having been destroyed.

¹⁷ Both the causes and effects of reincarnation having been extinguished.

The arhat still experiences physical pain and difficult situations but being completely free from the klesas – desire, hatred, and delusion – the mind does not suffer. Such was the case with many of the Buddha's disciples who became enlightened.

The second kind of Nirvana is Nirvana without remainder (parinirvana), where the life cycle terminates with no trace of the five skandhas, and no future Karmic consequences. From the perspective of individual liberation, an arhat or a Buddha who enters Nirvana without remainder may choose to no longer reappear in the three realms of existence.

Both kinds of Nirvana are reached at the fourth fruition level of the arhat path, the level of 'no more learning'. The three previous stages are all called stages 'with further learning', where there is still a need for the practitioner of the arhat path to continue to practice.

4. The Eightfold Noble Path

When the Buddha expounded the Four Noble Truths to five ascetic monks at Deer Park, in India, he explained the fourth noble truth as the path of liberation from suffering. By this he meant the Eightfold Noble Path, the eight practices that can lead one to the cessation of suffering. These are right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right perseverance, right mindfulness and right concentration.

Right View

The first noble path, right view, is the correct understanding of the true Dharma, especially the Four Noble Truths, the three Dharma seals (three marks of existence), and the twelve links of conditioned arising. Faith based on a correct understanding of the Dharma is fundamental to right view. As Buddhists we must not rely on blind faith. Right view is the most important step of the Eightfold Path in accomplishing cessation.

Right Intention

The second step of the Eightfold Noble Path is right intention, which means 'correct thought' and 'correct reflection'. As Buddhists we should hold correct views but we should also integrate them into our thinking and into our very being. To accomplish this we must reflect on what we have heard and learned. Understanding the origin of suffering, we will develop right intention and affirm that suffering can be ended. With that conviction we integrate the Four Noble Truths into our thinking and into the actions of our body, speech and mind, and we engage in the path. This is what meant by right intention.

Right speech

Right speech is the cultivation of the four precepts governing speech (In the Ten Good Deeds Sutra):

1. Speak the truth and abstain from uttering falsehoods, of which the most serious are claiming to a Buddha when one is not, and claiming to be enlightened when one is not.
2. Refrain from slander or divisive speech that can create discord.
3. Speak pleasantly and courteously, and refrain from harsh language that can cause suffering to others.
4. Refrain from frivolous chatter, and idle or malicious gossip.

When practiced as virtues these rules of speech help to purify our mind and actions.

Right Action

Right action refers to abstention from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and taking of intoxicants - the five precepts. We receive the five precepts when taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. To observe the five precepts is right action. If we engage in right action we don't create negative karma that leads to suffering.

Right Livelihood

Right livelihood means earning one's living in accordance with Buddhadharma, and not causing harm to oneself or others while doing so. There are therefore many kinds of right livelihood, and many kinds of wrong livelihood. The Buddha proscribed earning one's living through breaking any of the precepts of right speech and right action. Wrong kinds of livelihood also include making one's living through deception, through self-aggrandizement, through occult practices, through false claims about oneself, and through exaggeration. There are subtle distinctions among these but they all involve deception and exploiting others. In connection with right livelihood, the Buddha said in the Nikayas Sutra, "This holy life is lived for the sake of restraint, for abandoning [delusion], for non-attachment, for cessation."

Right Effort

The sixth noble path is right effort, or perseverance, and refers to the four proper lines of exertion, or endeavor:

1. To cut off unwholesome actions that have already commenced,
2. To abstain from starting unwholesome actions; that have not yet commenced,
3. To develop wholesome actions that have not yet commenced, and
4. To increase wholesome actions that have already commenced.

By 'acts' or 'actions' is meant physical acts as well as words and thoughts. Right effort is endeavoring to attain whatever in the Dharma is attainable through faith, diligent application, and perseverance.

Right Mindfulness

We should practice right mindfulness in order to concentrate or focus the mind. One approach to mindfulness practice is to contemplate the six objects of mindfulness: the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, the precepts, the merit of renouncing worldliness, and the merit of good deeds. The six mindfulness practices are really the prerequisites for engaging in the four foundations of mindfulness: of body, of sensation, of mind, and of dharmas (external and mental objects).

It is not necessary to practice all six mindfulness practices before practicing the four foundations. You can choose any one of the six as a preparatory practice. When we engage in the four foundations of mindfulness, we can enter the eighth noble path of right concentration.

Right Concentration

Right concentration consists of a repertory of samadhi practices. It would not be possible here to detail all of them, but they include the seven expedient stages:

1-5: the five methods of stilling the mind,

6 : the four foundations of mindfulness, and

7 : the path of seeing, which is also the practices of the sixteen aspects of the Four Noble Truths.

The Four Noble Truths and The Twelve Links

The first noble truth, the existence of suffering, is related to the seven-fold links of consciousness, name-and-form, the six sense faculties, contact, sensation, birth and aging/death. The second noble truth, the origin of suffering, is related to the five-fold links of ignorance, action, desire, grasping, and existence. In terms of the Four Noble Truths, you could say that the set of five are the causal factors and the set of seven the effects, namely, our being caught in the cycle of suffering. The origin of suffering causes suffering; suffering is dependent on its origin, and will not exist without it.

The Four Noble Truths and the Three Seals

The three Dharma seals affirm that all conditioned things are impermanent, all suffering is caused by fundamental ignorance, and all dharmas are without self. Let's relate these ideas to understanding suffering, severing the causes of suffering, attaining cessation, and cultivating the path. Realizing the first noble truth of suffering and the second noble truth of the origin of suffering depends on realizing impermanence and selflessness. This realization consists in separating from suffering, and cutting off its origins. The third and fourth noble truths tell us that to reach extinction-quietude we must engage in the path. To engage in the path is to govern oneself by the principles of impermanence and selflessness. With these principles in mind we can separate ourselves from suffering and eliminate its very origins. When we truly understand that suffering is impermanent and does not truly exist because its true nature is fundamentally empty, we are headed in the direction of cessation

All conditioned phenomena arise, deteriorate and cease. In order to mitigate or stop suffering in the face of this reality, Buddhist practitioners can use various methods. This is illustrated by the story of Bodhidharma's interview with Hui-k'o.

When Hui-k'o told his master Bodhidharma how troubled he was in his mind, the latter at once demanded that he produce this troubled mind before him so that he could calm it for its owner. When Hui-k'o complained about his mind being in trouble, he used the term "mind" in its conventional meaning, which indicated that his thoughts were following the conventional line of reasoning. That is to say, Hui-k'o cherished an unconscious belief in the reality of an entity known as "mind". This belief involved a dualistic interpretation of existence. That caused Hui-k'o to interpret his experiences based on dualistic concepts. As long as a person sees reality through the "lense" of duality, and believes in the reality of a mind entity, that person can not attain full realization.

Hui-k'o must have spent many years in this search for a mind, with which he was supposed to be endowed, philosophically or logically as well as conventionally. Finally, it must have dawned upon him that there was after all no such entity known as mind. But this recognition failed to ease the discomfort in his mind, because it still lacked a final "stamping"; that is, this recognition did not break out in his consciousness as an ultimate realization. He appeared again before Bodhidharma and gave an answer to the master's former demand to see his mind: "I seek for the mind but it is not attainable", said Hui-k'o. Bodhidharma now exclaimed, "I have put your mind at peace!"

Hui-k'o then had a real experience; this authoritative "stamping" on the part of the master broke the intellectual barrier and made Hui-k'o go beyond the mere formulation of his insight about the unattainability of a mind. Without Bodhidharma's absolute confirmation, Hui-k'o would not have realized the true nature of his mind. Now Hui-k'o's mind was at peace.

Story

Death

Death is the separation of the body from consciousness; that is all. The body developed from the five elements and it will dissolve back into the elements, but consciousness did not develop from the elements. Since the mind is different from the elements, it will flow on continuously.

We might doubt the existence of past and future lives, because we think nothing exists beyond what we can perceive with our senses. But actually, we are uncertain.

What happens after death, according to the Buddhist teachings, is that the body, the form aggregate, does not continue, but the other four aggregates of feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness continue.

In terms of consciousness, the habitual tendencies connected with the five sense consciousness, and the mental consciousness, the emotional consciousness, and the alaya consciousness travel to the next life. The alaya is the subconscious mind that is mixed with karmic habitual tendencies. This deepest part of consciousness goes on to the next life.

Habitual tendencies are one part of karma. After people die they no longer have the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body consciousness. Although the five sense consciousnesses are not active at that point, their habitual patterns continue. It is the same as when you are dreaming: your five senses are not functioning, but you still perceive yourself seeing and hearing and talking. Actually, those things are not happening; they are only habitual perceptions.

Similarly, in the bardo state there is no sensory activity, only habitual tendencies. In that way the alaya and the habitual patterns go together to the next life.

It is the conscious mind that reincarnates. One could say that the mind travels to the next stage, and when it encounters the necessary conditions, there is rebirth. This is not the reincarnation of a truly existing, permanent mind, because the nature of the mind is emptiness. In fact, it is only because of emptiness that it is possible to be reborn. If the mind were permanent, it could not change. We are reborn due to ignorance, and once the ignorance is removed through the realization of emptiness, we are not forced to reincarnate. People who realize the nature of the mind are liberated and do not reincarnate by the power of karma.

Story

Heaven And Earth Broken Up

Tadamasa, a senior retainer of Hojo Takatoki the Regent, had the Buddhist name Anzan (Quiet Mountain). He was a keen Zen follower and for twenty-three years came and went to the meditation hall for laymen at Kencho-ji. When the fighting broke out everywhere in 1331, he was wounded in one engagement, but in spite of the pain galloped to Kencho-ji to see Sozan, the 27th teacher there. A tea ceremony was going on at Kencho-ji, and the teacher seeing the man in armour come in, quickly put a teacup in front of him and said, 'How is this?'

The warrior at once crushed it under his foot and said, 'Heaven and earth broken up together.'

The teacher said, 'When heaven and earth broken up, how is it with you?'

Anzan stood with his hands crossed over his breast. The teacher hit him, and he involuntary cried out from the pain of his wounds.

The teacher said, 'Heaven and earth not quite broken up yet.'

The drum sounded from the camp across the mountain, and Tadamasa galloped quickly back. The next evening he came again, covered with blood, to see the teacher. The teacher came out and said again, 'When heaven and earth are broken up, how it is with you?'

Anzan, supporting himself on his blood-stained sword, gave a great Katsu! And died standing in front of the teacher.

There is no wisdom, no attainment, and nothing to attain.

There are three stages in practicing the Prajnaparamita.

The first stage is the Prajnaparamita as language; the second stage is the Prajnaparamita as insight, and the third stage is the Prajnaparamita as true appearance or true nature. The second stage, the Prajnaparamita as insight means that we have a profound understanding of the Prajnaparamita, but this level of understanding or wisdom is temporary, and we don't yet realize the ultimate truth that is true nature.

This understanding is consciousness. But this consciousness at this stage ceases to attach to six sense objects and changes direction to observe our mind. Therefore this consciousness is called "reverse observation consciousness". This consciousness little by little becomes stronger and matures, and it transforms itself into Prajna-wisdom.

Although such understanding makes it possible for us to master and eliminate our illusions and recognize the truth, we must then let go of the wisdom that led us to that recognition. In the third stage, we fully recognize the true meaning or true nature of the Prajnaparamita. Arriving at the recognition of true nature (2) is like arriving at the other shore (the shore of liberation) and we feel a great sense of ease and relief. Upon arriving at a recognition of the true nature or the Prajnaparamita, we no longer need all the means that helped us arrive at this realization.

(2) The two verses below express the mind state of Prajna as insight and Prajna as true nature:

«One piece of empty solidity, beyond saying and feeling. This is how humans and gods see Subhuti.»

Have you heard how Subhuti was sitting quietly on a cliff when all the gods showered him with flowers to praise him.

The venerable Subhuti said, "Who is showering down these flowers in praise?"

The gods replied, "We honor you for being good at expounding the Prajna wisdom."

Subhuti said, "I have never spoken a single word about Prajna wisdom; why offer praise?"

The gods said, "You didn't speak and we didn't hear – no speaking and no hearing is true Prajna wisdom," and again they caused the earth to tremble and flowers to shower.

We often believe that the person who reaches the other shore is a Noble One, or a Supernatural being. We believe that the being on this shore (the shore of suffering) is a human being and that this shore is illusion, and the other shore is enlightenment. Explore this idea carefully: A human being goes from this shore to the other shore. When he is on this shore and when he reaches the other shore, is he the same person or a different person? He is the same person. This is why the Heart Sutra tells us there is no attainment. Why? It is because, if we can attain something, then that something is not inherent in us.

(3) Because Buddha wisdom is intrinsic in every body, the question: "What is Buddha" is fruitless and meaningless. This conversation proves that point:

A monk (named Hui Chao) asked Fa Yen, "What is Buddha?"

Fa Yen said, "You are Hui Chao."

This story is also similar:

Superintendent Tse had been staying in Fa Yen's congregation, but he had never asked to enter (Fa Yen's) room (for special instruction). One day Fa Yen asked him, "Why have you never entered my room?" Tse replied, "Don't you recall, Teacher, that when I was at Ch'ing Lin's place, I had an entry (enlightenment)."

Fa Yen said, "Try to recall it for me." Tse said, "I asked, 'What is Buddha?' Lin said, 'The Fire God comes looking for fire' " Fa Yen said, "Good words, but I'm afraid you misunderstood them. Can you clarify them more for me?" Tse replied, "The Fire God is in the province of fire; he is seeking fire with fire. Likewise, I am Buddha, yet I go on searching for Buddha." Fa Yen said, "Sure enough, Superintendent has misunderstood." Containing his anger, Tse left the monastery and went off across the river.

Fa Yen watched him go and said, "This man can be saved if he comes back; if he doesn't return, he can't be saved." Out on the road, Tse thought to himself, "Fa Yen is the teacher of five hundred people; surely he would not deceive me?" So he turned back and again called on Fa Yen, who said to him, "Ask me anything and I'll answer you." Thereupon Tse asked, "What is Buddha?" Fa Yen replied, "The Fire God comes looking for fire." Hearing these words Tse was enlightened.

Question: When Ch'in Ling said to superintendent Tse, "The Fire God comes looking for fire" Tse was not enlightened. When Fa Yen said the same thing to Tse, Tse was enlightened? Why?

The practice of meditation on Prajnaparamita helps us to dissolve our illusions and awaken. But the person who is awakened is the same person who was deluded, and thus the Heart Sutra tells us there is no attainment. The Vietnamese have a saying, "The nose and eyebrows are exactly the same, but the mind of a human being and the mind of the Noble one are miles apart." This means when a person awakens from his illusion, he has the same nose and eyebrows as when he was drowning in his illusions.

The difference is only in his mind and not in his appearance.

When we are trapped in illusions, we live in misery. When we awaken and are no longer trapped in delusion, all of our miseries come to an end. Where does that inner peace come from? It comes from nowhere; it is simply the result of the transformation of our mind. Delusion brings about misery, awakening brings about inner peace, and there is nothing to be attained. That is why the Heart Sutra tells us there is no wisdom, no attainment, and nothing to attain. A person who practices the Prajnaparamita with no desire to develop wisdom and no desire to attain anything at all is called a Bodhisattva.

Story

The Master Sculptor

The Master Sculptor surveyed the different blocks of the marble at the quarry. In his lifetime the sculptor has lured that there existed a “suchness” to every piece of stone. Finding that suchness and releasing it to its true life had been the secret of the sculptor’s success.

“Ah-ha”, he would say. “There is a heroic figure locked in that piece and a saint trapped in side that other one. But where will I find the stone from which I will sculpt my masterwork, a glorious statue of the Buddha?”

He had been searching for what he called the “Buddha block” for over forty years and now he felt his energy waning. He had travelled to the great quarries of the world: Italy where Michelangelo had mined his stone, Vermont where the stone glowed with light, and to obscure regions in the mountain of China. No where could he find that one perfect slab from which he knew he could release the most perfect likeness of Buddha.

He consulted experts from around the world. He hired a specialist to scour obscure areas. No success. In search of consolation, he sought out a local Zen priest, who headed a small temple just at the end of his street. When he explained his fruitless search, the priest smiled and said:

“No problem”

“Do you mean you can tell me where I might find the perfect material from which I can release the Buddha of my dreams?” said the excited sculptor.

“Of course”

“Where?”

“Over there”, said the priest pointing to a well in the courtyard.

The excited master sculptor ran to the well and looked down. There he saw his own image looking back at him.

Because there is no attainment, the Bodhisattvas, relying on the Prajnaparamita, have no obstruction in their mind. Because there is no obstruction, they overcome all fear, and thus they pass far beyond all illusion and realize Perfect Nirvana.

Most of us look at life from the perspective of having or not having what we think we want or need. We are trapped by our own beliefs about attainment.

We tend to believe that the final goal of Buddhist practice is to attain Buddha wisdom. However, since Buddha wisdom or Buddha-nature is always within us, there is nothing to attain, it just would be an experience. Rather it is necessary for us to recognize our Buddha-nature through practicing the Three Learnings (Morality – Concentration – Wisdom).

The stages of attainment, as mentioned in the Sutras, are simply steps on the path to enlightenment.

In the Theravada tradition there are 4 stages of attainment, which in this context means 'steps on the path to enlightenment' or 4 stages of sainthood which are:

- 1st grade: Srota-apanna (one who has entered the stream of holy living, and seven times rebirth back into this world);
- 2nd grade: Sakrdagamin (one who has only one rebirth back into this world)
- 3rd grade: Anagamin (one who is not returning to this world, but will be reborn in the Anagamin celestial realm).
- 4th grade: Arhat (one who will not be reborn anywhere because

he/she has destroyed the karma of reincarnation. But he/she can choose to be reborn anywhere if he/she has vowed to do so).

In the Zen tradition there are the Ten Ox-Herding Stages:

1. Looking for the ox.
2. Seeing the traces of the ox.
3. Seeing the ox.

4. Catching the ox.
5. Herding the ox.
6. Coming home on the ox's back.
7. The ox is forgotten, leaving the man alone.
8. The ox and the man are both out of sight.
9. Returning to the origin, back to the source. 'Origin' and 'source' are our very own nature that is Buddha-nature.
10. Entering the city with bliss-bestowing hands that help others because of his Bodhisattvahood.

Bodhisattvas realize that all worldly phenomena (dharmas) are not real. All sensory organs, sensory objects, sensory consciousness, and the eighteen realms are also impermanent, and all are comprised of causes and effects. Even the Buddha's Teachings (Dharmas) (which are beyond worldly phenomena), such as the Four Noble Truths, the Twelve Links of Interdependent Origin, etc. are impermanent and are only the means to guide us out of the cycle of birth and death. In fact, if we practice well, we will realize that all Dharmas are only the means to liberate beings from the cycle of birth and death.

The Dharmas are like the finger that points out the moon or the raft used to cross the river to the other shore. The finger is not the moon, but following where the finger is pointing, we see the moon. The raft is not the other shore, but helps us to reach it. In the same way, the Dharmas are means, not ends.

Therefore, the Heart Sutra states: "Because there is no attainment, the Bodhisattvas, relying on the Prajnaparamita, have no obstruction in their minds. Because there is no obstruction, they overcome all fear, and thus they pass far beyond all illusion and realize Perfect Nirvana."

We have obstructions in our mind when we are attached to our ego. See the story The Paper Sword. The nun after many years training with a Zen master realizes the state of egolessness and as a result she has "no obstruction in her mind" and "she overcomes all fear".

Does fear dominate our minds? Is it our personal terrorist? We are constantly afraid. The existence of only a few bacteria and viruses in our body are enough to create terror in us.

We can be terrified by hearing this person has hepatitis B, or that person has hepatitis C, etc. We worry that we too will become ill. We are frightened when we see the impermanence of everything. We are rarely at peace, afraid of being apart from our loved ones, afraid of coming into contact with our enemies. If we realized that we have nothing to attain, we would have no fear.

If there is nothing to attain or to expect, no 'failure' or 'loss' are possible. The success or attainment we imagine for ourselves is a dream or an illusion. Something that was only a dream or illusion can not be gained or lost. The things or people that we thought were 'ours' have never been possessed. Nothing can be gained or lost if it has never been 'possessed'.

We often believe that we will live for a long time, but death comes unexpectedly and we cannot bargain with it. If we realized fully that our body is impermanent and death is natural, then we would no longer fear death. Let me give you another example of how unrealistic we are and how often we live in illusion. The reality is that the bodies of human beings often produce unpleasant odors. We bathe and use perfumes to diminish or cover up these odors. We may know that we do not smell good, but if someone dares to say so, we will be very offended. We live in illusion all the time and cannot see reality, and from not recognizing reality, we continue to live in illusion.

In this example, we don't want people telling us that we don't smell pleasant. We cannot accept this unpleasant reality. Our denial of this reality reveals the fact that we are living in a state of illusion.

What does illusion mean? An illusion is an idea or thought similar to what we see in our dreams. Can dreams become a reality when we wake up? Never. Dreams are deceptive, but we live in dreams more than in reality.

We don't recognize things as they are, but we perceive things through the distorting lens or filter of our thoughts and misinterpretations. These distortions are produced by our ego.

The world is filled with countless illusions such as the illusion of fame, illusion of advantage (gain), illusion of wealth, etc.

These are illusions because they are impermanent and because from a wisdom perspective they are not real.

Someone who can see that all forms are impermanent, that all forms are just a compilation of impermanent causes and effects, and that all forms are empty, will realize that in the emptiness there is nothing to attain.. If your practice is based totally on the Prajnaparamita, your mind will be freed from all obstacles and you will overcome all fear and illusion. Overcoming fear and illusion is realizing Perfect Nirvana, the place of liberation and peace.

Nirvana is a Sanskrit word. The Chinese translation of Nirvana is no birth, or no longer being born or dying. We often hear of a tradition of practice which claims to make longevity possible by means of a longevity medicine that can prolong life forever. Why does one want to take such a medicine? It is because we are afraid of death. If the masters of the longevity practice had such a medicine, then there would be many longevity masters alive today. Take a look around you from China to Vietnam. Have you found any longevity masters? If they are not to be found, where did they go? They went to their graves! In the Buddha's eyes, where there is birth, there is death. This body is comprised of causes and effects, and what comes together must also fall apart: The only uncertainty is whether it will come apart quickly or slowly. The Buddha was an enlightened one, but when it was time for his body to fall apart, he could not stop it. This is reality. Falling apart will not happen if coming together has not taken place; hence if Nirvana is not born it will not die. Nirvana is a clear, peaceful state of mind with no form, no birth, and no death.

In Buddhism there are two kinds of Nirvana: the Form Nirvana and the Formless Nirvana. Someone who attains the Form Nirvana is an enlightened one, but he is still alive. He remains in human form, does everything that a normal person does, and lives a normal life, but his mind is freed from all the clouds of passions (or afflictions) and he has overcome all suffering.

See the story The Storm. Our recollections of the past and our notions about the future are all illusions. Only the present moment is reality. Instead of suffering because of our fear of death which will come some time in the future, why don't we live in the present moment focusing on what is before our eyes?

That is called the Form Nirvana. On the other hand, if someone who is enlightened subsequently dies, we say he has arrived at Formless Nirvana. Formless Nirvana has no form, and is no longer subject to birth and death.

In the Middle Discourses Sutra, there is the Interdependent Origin Sutra in which the Buddha taught, "Someone who can comprehend the Interdependent Origin can see the Dharmas; whoever can see the Dharmas can see the Buddha." If we can completely comprehend the Interdependent Origin's logic, we will see that all formations (Forms) are impermanent; they are comprised of causes and effects; and their true nature is emptiness. By realizing this, we are no longer tied down by any ideas or concepts. No longer being tied down by any ideas or concepts means being at ease, and being at ease is being in Nirvana.

Stories

The Paper Sword

In 1331 when Nitta Yoshisada was fighting against Hojo Sadatoki, a chief retainer of the Hojo family, named Sakurada Sadakuni, was slain. His wife Sawa wished to pray for the dead man; she cut off her hair and entered Tokei-ji as the nun Shotaku. For many years she devoted herself to Zen under Daisen, the 17th master at Enkaku-ji, and in the end she became the third teacher of Tokei-ji.

In the Rohatsu training week of December 1338 she was returning from her evening interview with the teacher at Enkaku-ji, when on the way a man armed with a sword saw her and was attracted by her beauty. He threatened her with the sword and came to rape her. The nun took out a piece of paper and rolled it up, then thrust it like a sword at the man's eyes. He became unable to strike and was completely overawed by her spiritual strength. He turned to run and the nun gave a Katsu! (shout), hitting him with the paper sword. He fell and then fled.

The Storm

During a great storm at sea a band of terrified pilgrims huddled in a circle around their Zen master as the vessel pitched and the bulkheads groaned.

"We shall all die," lamented one.

"I wish I had been better to my wife and children," moaned another.

"I had hoped to marry after the pilgrimage," said a young woman. "It is your fault, Master; you brought us onto this vessel and now we will perish with so many regrets and so many blighted dreams."

"Look at this," said the patient master. He took two wooden triangles and placed them with just the tips barely touching.

"This top triangle is the past. Nothing can bring it back or change it.

“This bottom triangle is the future. It is equally futile to predict it.
“And this tiny intersecting speck is the present, which changes
with each beat of your heart.”

“So ...?” the pilgrims said.

“So, it’s useless to agonize over what is gone or pine for what
might be. Live now in the only moment of time available to
you”.

“What is that?”

“The present.”

“How do we do that?”

“Let’s eat,” said the master.

Minutely Subtle

Here is a story about Yamamoto Gempo Roshi.

There was a Rinzai priest, the Reverend Matsubara, and the
nearest English word for him is preacher. He spoke very well.
He often went with Gempo Roshi to the temples and gave talks
at Dharma classes that were not a sesshin.

On one occasion, it happened that Gempo Roshi could not be
present during the talk. The weather was terrible and even
though the talk had been announced long in advance, not as
many people gathered as the temple had expected. In fact, only
three showed up. But the Reverend Matsubara spoke as
though there were two hundred or three hundred people in the
audience.

Gempo Roshi saw him later and said, “My attendant monk told
me that because of this terrible storm, only three people came
to hear you. Nevertheless, you spoke as though it was a full
audience. Let me ask you,” said Gempo Roshi, “suppose only
one person showed up. Would you still speak in the same
manner?”

“Yes, I would.”

“Suppose nobody showed up, then what?”

The Reverend Matsubara said, “Then I would not speak.”

Immediately Gempo Roshi said, "That's no good! Do you do zazen because of your friends? Can't you sit alone?"

"Yes, I can."

"Do you do the Nembutsu because someone else is there to chant Amida Butsu? Can't you do it by yourself?"

"Of course I can."

"So," said Gempo Roshi, "even if no one shows up, the pillars hear. The floors listen."

The same point can be made about koto, the Japanese harp. It is made of kiri wood. This is a very soft wood, and only this wood can be used for the koto. Naturally, the koto-maker will search for the best kiri wood, and that is found in the deep mountains near a temple where it can hear the evening gong.

All Buddhas in the past, present and future depend on Prajnaparamita and attain Anuttara-Samyak-Sambodhi.

Anuttara-Samyak-Sambodhi is a Sanskrit word, and it means a Perfect, Complete and Universal (limitless in time and place) Enlightenment. For this reason, the Prajnaparamita is the path that all Bodhisattvas and Buddhas in the three times pursue.

Therefore, one should know that Prajnaparamita is the great transcendental mantra, the great unsurpassed mantra, the unequalled mantra, and the supreme mantra, that destroys all suffering and is eternally true.

Therefore, proclaim the Prajnaparamita mantra, saying: "Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha."

The literal meaning of the Prajnaparamita mantra *Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha* (in Sanskrit) is as follows: *Gate, gate* means gone, gone. *Paragate* means gone all the way to the other shore. *Parasamgate* means everyone, including the Sangha, and the entire community of all sentient beings, who together have gone to the other shore. *Bodhi* is enlightenment or awakening. *Svaha* is a cry of joy or excitement like "Welcome!" or "Quickly!"

Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha means “Gone, gone, gone all the way over! Everyone has gone to the other shore of enlightenment. Welcome!”

The essential meaning of the mantra is neither mysterious nor secret. To fully realize its meaning, however, requires a deep level of wisdom. Once we truly grasp or realize its essential meaning, we recognize that the mantra contains immeasurable powers for us if we can approach or recite the mantra without any ideas and concepts in our mind. To enhance the transformative powers of the mantra, its text has always been presented and recited in Sanskrit.

The Heart of the Prajnaparamita expresses three basic ideas:

1. The Prajnaparamita is rooted in the unshakeable logic, reality and truth of Interdependent Origin. Interdependent Origin affirms that all formations (forms), as huge as this earth or as insignificant as a speck of dust, exist from the combination of causes and effects. A human being is a combination or compilation of causes and effects. All material objects are compilations of causes and effects; Interdependent Origin is therefore the ultimate reality of all formations.

2. Because all formations come into being and exist as a result of Interdependent Origin, the true nature of all formations is emptiness. No formation can exist entirely by itself and no formation can create itself. Therefore, all formations are compilations of causes and effects and no formation has a separate self. It follows that all formations are impermanent. Therefore, the true nature of all formations is emptiness.

3. As indicated in the short verse composed by Venerable Nagarjuna, all formations are the compilations of causes and effects. Therefore all forms have Emptiness as their true nature. Consequently, their being and existence are unreal (impermanent). If we realize that all formations are impermanent, whether they have form or are without form (such as an idea) we have realized the Middle Way.

Someone who can comprehend the Prajnaparamita is a skillful practitioner. As a result of the immeasurable wisdom of the Heart of the Prajnaparamita Sutra, she/he will arrive at the shore of Nirvana, and become liberated from the cycle of birth and death.

Daikaku's One-Word Sutra

At the beginning of the Kencho era (1249), “Old Buddha” Daikaku (who was Chinese) was living in Kyoto, Japan, and was invited by the shogun Tokiyori to spread Zen to Eastern Japan. Some priests and laymen of other sects were not at all pleased with this, and out of jealousy circulated a rumor that the teacher was a spy sent to Japan by the Mongols. Gradually more and more people began to believe the rumor. At the time, the Mongols were in fact sending emissaries to Japan, and the shogun’s government, misled by the campaign of rumors, transferred Daikaku to Koshu. Daikaku was not the least disturbed, but gladly followed his own karma which caused him to be transferred.

Some local officials in Eastern Japan who were firm believers in reciting the formula of the Lotus Sutra, or in recitation of the name of the Buddha Amitabha, one day came to Daikaku and said, “The Heart Sutra as read in the Zen tradition is long and difficult to read, whereas Nichiren teaches the recitation of the title of the Lotus Sutra (Namo Wonderful Law of the Lotus Sutra) which has only seven syllables, and Ipen teaches recitation of the name of the Buddha Amitabha, which is only six syllables (Namo Amitabha Buddha). The Zen Sutra is much longer (262 words), and it is more difficult to remember and recite”.

The teacher listened to all this and said: “What would a follower of Zen want with a long text? If you want to recite the Zen Sutra, do it with “one word”¹⁸. It is the six and seven syllable recitations which are too long”.

¹⁸ Ultimate truth.

Bukko's No-Word Sutra

Ryo-A, a priest of the Tsurugaoka Hachiman shrine, came to the town of Magaku. He told Bukko, a Zen master and "National Teacher" who succeeded Daikaku, the story of Daikaku's one-word sutra. Ryo-A said: "I am not going to ask about the six or seven syllables recited by other sects, but what is the "one word" of Zen?"

The teacher Bukko said: "Our school does not build up (create) any word. Dharma is a special transmission outside scriptures, a truth transmitted from heart to heart. If you can penetrate through to that, your whole life will be a dharani (Buddhist mantra), and your death will be a dharani. Why do you want a word or half a word? The old master Daikaku went deep into retreat in the forest and afterwards "gave one word" ¹⁹. Now the whole Zen world is tearing itself to pieces on the thorns²⁰, trying to find it. Reverend Ryo-A, if you wish to grasp that word, then without opening your mouth, recite the sutra of "no-word". If you fail in your awareness of the no-word, you will at once lose the one word. The "one word" is displayed above the thirty-three heavens. It is buried at the bottom of the eighth great hell.

¹⁹ "Gave one word" means he expressed his realization of ultimate truth.

²⁰ The Zen practitioner is in danger of tearing the 'one word' apart and losing the truth.

Therefore, where, in all four directions and above and below, is the 'one word' hidden? At this present moment, is there a word (in front of you), or is there not?"

The "golden needle did not penetrate the embroidered cloth"²¹ (of the priest's mind), and he silently took his leave.

²¹ "Golden needle" is the master's explanation; "embroided cloth" is the confused mind.

Story

Painting The True Nature

Ekichu, the 7th master of Jufuku-ji, was a famous painter. One day Nobumitsu came to see him and asked whether he could paint the fragrance described in the famous line: "After walking through flowers, the horse's hoof is fragrant". The teacher drew a horse's hoof and a butterfly fluttering around it (attracted by the fragrance).

Then Nobumitsu quoted the line: "Spring breeze over the river bank" and asked for a picture of the breeze. The teacher drew a branch of willow waving.

Nobumitsu cited the famous Zen phrase: "Pointing directly to the human heart, we will see our own true nature and become Buddha". He asked for a picture of the heart. The teacher picked up the brush and flicked a spot of ink onto Nobumitsu's face. The warrior was surprised and annoyed, and the teacher rapidly sketched the angry face.

Then Nobumitsu asked for a picture of the 'nature' as in the phrase 'see the nature'. The teacher broke the brush and said: "That's the picture".

Nobumitsu did not understand and the teacher remarked: "If you don't have the seeing eye, you can't see it".

Nobumitsu said: "Take another brush and paint the picture of the nature".

The teacher replied: "Show me your true nature and I will paint it".

Nobumitsu had no words.

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