

**Saturday Shinzo Sangha Talks by Will Holcomb, St. Louis, MO
December 29, 2012**

THE HEART SUTRA: Part One

Good morning. I'm glad each of you could make it this wintry morning. We have a few people here who haven't been here before, so what we do is we have a 30 minute sitting and we talk for a bit and then have lunch. It's a big topic today and we'll probably have to break it up and talk about it over several weeks. What I'd like to discuss today is the Heart Sutra.

On Saturdays we don't have a lot of ceremonies or chanting, not too many bells. That's sort of by design. But the Heart Sutra is commonly a part of Zen Buddhist gatherings. And on New Year's Eve we're having an event where we'll sit for a couple of hours and at midnight we'll chant the Heart Sutra.

Well, you don't need to know anything about the Heart Sutra to chant it, but the problem is that if you don't know anything about the Heart Sutra it sounds like nonsense, and you wonder. "why am I chanting this nonsense?" So it does help to know a little about it. There are whole books written about the Heart Sutra. You can't know everything about it, but knowing a little helps.

Well, what is the Heart Sutra? It's pretty short. It comes from a much longer composition, it's condensed, like a Reader's Digest version of the *Maha Prajna Paramita Sutra*. We don't really know who wrote it or where it came from, but was definitely around in the 7th century. There was a famous Chinese monk called Xuanzang who at a young age dedicated himself to the study of Buddhism. He had a restless spirit. He decided he needed to go to the source, so he traveled across the Himalayas, which in the 7th century was a big deal, to gather writings from India and bring them back to China. He gathered many scrolls, and brought them back to China and translated them. He also had an uncommon ability with languages. The Heart Sutra has had a lot of staying power because it's chanted all over. Certainly in China, in Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, Vietnam and Tibet, in addition to Western countries.

It is a common part of Buddhist ceremonies and all these cultures. So I thought we would just start at the beginning and talk about the title: **The Maha Prajna Paramita Hrdya Sutra.**

There are a lot of Sanskrit words there. *Maha* just means great. *Prajna* is a complicated word. It's usually translated as wisdom, but it has two parts to it: *pra* and *jna*. The *pra* part can be considered like an amplifier, or it can mean that which precedes, and *jna* means knowledge. Or the kind of knowledge you have before you start cluttering your mind with concepts, is another way of looking at it. A little bit like intuition. *Prajna*, wisdom.

Paramita, literally means the other shore, but it also has the connotation of perfection. In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition there are the six paramitas. And *prajna* is one of those. The others are *sila* or morality, and *shanti* which is patience, and *virya* which is effort, *dana*, which is giving and *dhyana*, which is concentration, as in meditation.

So the *prajna paramita* is referring to the wisdom *paramita*. The other shore is enlightenment, but the paradox about that is that **the other shore is right here.** We're already at the other shore. It's a matter of realizing that. *Hrdya* means heart, the central part, the most important part. Sutra comes from the same root as suture, what we use to sew things up in an operating room, it means to bind, to hold together, a thread running through something.

So that's the title: *Maha Prajna Paramita Hrdya Sutra*. It's about wisdom, but as you get into looking at the content, an important concept, and probably the central concept in the Heart Sutra is the concept of emptiness, the Sanskrit word being *shunyata*. The English translation 'emptiness' may not help us here. It starts off with Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, who is not a historical figure, it's a mythical figure. And we

don't know where this myth actually came from, but it likewise is widespread. It can be found throughout Asia. There are different names are use depending on where you are. In China it's Kuan Yin and in Japan it's Kannon. There are different labels, but this figure, Avalokiteshvara is widespread throughout the Buddhist world. **What this figure embodies is compassion.**

Ava means down in Sanskrit, and *lokita* means looking. and the *eshvara* can mean someone who is in charge of things, master. But also there's also a closely related word--sound, *Shiva*. People use all of these meanings, and speak of he or she who hears and observes the sounds of the world, the lamentations, the cries of the world.

I say he or she because in India it was a male figure and then in China it sort of became a female figure, and in other parts of the world, it's ambiguous, It's hard to tell whether it's a male or female figure. So it seems to transcend gender.

A Bodhisattva, as we've said before is someone who is dedicated to the welfare of others equally as to the welfare of oneself. So it's dedicated to everyone's welfare, trying to be of benefit to all beings. So Avalokiteshvara is a Bodhisattva. And who is this? We're all Bodhisattvas. By being here today we're Bodhisattvas. It's not some celestial being, it's us.

So Avalokiteshvara was the embodiment of compassion, was practicing deeply the *prajna paramita*. So what was he or she doing? Well, meditating, practicing. And that raises a couple questions.

One is okay, if you're a big Bodhisattva and the embody compassion, why do you have to meditate? Haven't you got it? And this kind of reinforces the notion that meditation is not a means to an end, that **meditation is not something you do to get something at the end. It is the end.** So even this illustrious Bodhisattva is practicing, meditating. And out of that meditation comes this wisdom, the understanding that all five skandhas are empty.

So let's talk about what skandhas are. At the Buddha's time, the personality was kind of divided up into five categories. There was form, feeling, perception, fabrication and consciousness.

So what's that? As an illustration, if you walk into the room and it's dark and you're trying to get it cleaned up and then you notice that (he throws a dollar bill on the floor). First you see it as a piece of trash on the floor. So you notice first of all you are aware of a form, and then you might have a feeling related to that form: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. It comes up right away. Well if you're coming in to clean up, it's sort of unpleasant, just by noticing it there, you've got to get rid of it. Then you turn on the light and you see that it's a dollar bill. You recognize it. And then you're feeling might change. Oh that's interesting. A dollar bill on the floor. And then, so feeling, perception, recognition, and then fabrication is sort of calling on all of your experiences with such things, and starting to formulate a plan of what to do about it.

Fabrication. And then things come up like, I wonder why that's there, I wonder whose it is. What do I do with this dollar bill? Fabrication. And then consciousness is just an awareness of this whole process. You're aware, oh I'm dealing with this process of having encountered this form. So when Avalokiteshvara is thinking about these or contemplating these five aspects of personality, he or she realizes that they are all empty.

We don't really have a word that works very well here, and every word we have sort of leads us off the path, including emptiness because emptiness implies that nothing's there. Is the buddha teaching that there's no self, no Gary, no Keith, nobody at all? That's not it. So emptiness sort of leads us off in that direction. It more refers to there being no fixed, permanent, separate entity. I mean sometimes we tend to think that we're really very solid. Every morning the same person gets up, goes through the day, goes to bed and just everything is just very solid there. And then of course we have this problem of death that we realize oh something must happen at some point, and at some point this solidity must do away and how does this all work? It can seem frightening. But in meditation as you watch the mind...we talk about

feelings, thoughts, plans sort of coming and going you realize how vaporous all this is. Our form is constantly changing, constantly aging, getting sick getting well, lying down, standing up, maybe we have an accident, lose part of an arm, constant change in form.

Feelings of course change. At some point during the thirty minutes of sitting today, you were probably thinking, oh this is nice being here, Then at other points you may have been thinking, I wonder how many more minutes are left? So all these things are constantly flowing through the mind, and just paying attention to that is a realization of emptiness, the insubstantial nature of everything.

And also we become aware of how that constant change is not something we can control. It's conditioned. And that leads to the idea of interdependence. None of the things I'm saying today are my unique creation, or idea. They are all things I picked up, either reading, listening to others, they all come from someplace else.

So Avalokiteshvara perceived that all five skandhas are empty they're interdependent, they're conditioned they're constantly changing. And by that he or she was saved from all suffering and distress. Just like that. So sort of where we'll stop. That's the cliff hanger.