the heart sutra

TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY BY

RED PINE

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the heart sutra

THE WOMB OF BUDDHAS

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The Heart Sutra

The Heart Sutra

1 The noble Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva,
while practicing the deep practice of Prajnaparamita,
looked upon the Five Skandhas
and seeing they were empty of self-existence,
5 said, "Here, Shariputra,
form is emptiness, emptiness is form;
emptiness is not separate from form,
form is not separate from emptiness;
whatever is form is emptiness,
whatever is emptiness is form.
The same holds for sensation and perception,
memory and consciousness.
10 Here, Shariputra, all dharmas are defined by emptiness
not birth or destruction, purity or defilement,
completeness or deficiency.
Therefore, Shariputra, in emptiness there is no form,
no sensation, no perception, no memory and no
consciousness;
no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body and no mind;
15 no shape, no sound, no smell, no taste, no feeling
and no thought;
no element of perception, from eye to conceptual
consciousness;
no causal link, from ignorance to old age and death,
and no end of causal link, from ignorance to old age and death;
no suffering, no source, no relief, no path;
20 no knowledge, no attainment and no non-attainment.
Therefore, Shariputra, without attainment,
bodhisattavas take refuge in Prajnaparamita
and live without walls of the mind.

Without walls of the mind and thus without fears,
they see through delusions and finally nirvana.
All buddhas past, present and future
also take refuge in Prajnaparamita
and realize unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.
You should therefore know the great mantra of Prajnaparamita,
the mantra of great magic,
the unexcelled mantra,
the mantra equal to the unequalled,
which heals all suffering and is true, not false,
the mantra in Prajnaparamita spoken thus:
'Gate gate, paragate, parasangate, bodhi svaha.'"

Introduction

THE *Heart Sutra* is Buddhism in a nutshell. It covers more of the Buddha's teachings in a shorter span than any other scripture, and it does so without being superficial or commonplace. Although the author is unknown, he was clearly someone with a deep knowledge of the Dharma and an ability to summarize lifetimes of meditation in a few well-crafted lines. Having studied the *Heart Sutra* for the past year, I would describe it as a work of art as much as religion. And perhaps it is one more proof, if any were needed, that distinguishing these two callings is both artificial and unfortunate.

Whoever the author was, he begins by calling upon Avalokiteshvara, Buddhism's most revered bodhisattva, to introduce the teaching of Prajnaparamita, the Perfection of Wisdom, to the Buddha's wisest disciple, Shariputra. Avalokiteshvara then shines the light of this radical form of wisdom on the major approaches to reality used by the Sarvastivadins, the most prominent Buddhist sect in Northern India and Central Asia two thousand years ago, and outlines the alternative approach of the Prajnaparamita. Finally, Avalokiteshvara also provides a key by means of which we can call this teaching to mind and unlock its power on our behalf.

With this sequence in mind, I have divided the text into four parts and have also broken it into thirty-five lines to make it easier to study or chant. In the first part (lines 1-11), we are reminded of the time when the Buddha transmitted his entire understanding of the Abhidharma, or Matrix of Reality, during the seventh monsoon following his Enlightenment. We then consider Avalokiteshvara's reformulation of such instruction to correct Shariputra's misunderstanding of it. The basis for this reformulation is the teaching of *prajna* in place of *jnana,* or wisdom rather than knowledge. Thus, the conceptual truths on which early Buddhists relied for their practice are held up to the light and found to be empty of anything that would separate them from the indivisible fabric of what is truly real. In their place, Avalokiteshvara introduces us to emptiness, the common denominator of the mundane, the

metaphysical, and the transcendent.

In the second part (lines 12-20), Avalokiteshvara lists the major conceptual categories of the Sarvastivadin Abhidharma and considers each in the light of Prajnaparamita. Following the same sequence of categories used by the Sarvastivadins themselves, he reviews such forms of analysis as the Bodies of Awareness, the Abodes of Sensation, the Elements of Perception, the Chain of Dependent Origination, the Four Truths, and the attainment or non-attainment of Nirvana, and sees them all dissolve in emptiness.

In the third part (lines 21-28), Avalokiteshvara turns from the Sarvastivadin interpretation of the Abhidharma to the emptiness of Prajnaparamita, which provides travelers with all they need to reach the goal of buddhahood. Here, Avalokiteshvara reviews the major signposts near the end of the path without introducing additional conceptual categories that might obstruct or deter those who would travel it.

In the fourth part (lines 29-35), Avalokiteshvara leaves us with a summary of the teaching of Prajnaparamita in the form of an incantation that reminds and empowers us to go beyond all conceptual categories. This teaching has with good reason been called "the mother of buddhas." Having survived a yearlong journey through the jungle of early Buddhism to the secret burial ground of the Abhidharma, I would add that the *Heart Sutra* is their womb. With this incantation ringing in our minds, we thus enter the goddess, Prajnaparamita, and await our rebirth as buddhas. This is the teaching of the *Heart Sutra,* as I have come to understand it over the past year.

KARMIC BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2002, I was working on a translation of the *Lankavatara Sutra* when my friend Silas Hoadley asked me if I would contribute a new English version of the *Heart Sutra* for a meditation retreat he was organizing just outside the small town where we live. I was glad to take a break from the *Lanka* and began comparing Sanskrit editions and Chinese translations and poring over commentaries. Although I had first encountered the *Heart Sutra* more than thirty years earlier and had read the standard explanations of its

meaning, I had never thought of it as anything more than a superficial summary of the Buddhist concept of *shunyata,* or emptiness. I failed to see anything in it of interest beyond the line: "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," not that this made much sense to me.

This time I didn't even get past the name: the *Heart Sutra.* I discovered that there was no record of this title until Hsuantsang's Chinese translation of the text appeared in 649, four hundred years after the first translation into Chinese. This in turn led me to wonder how the Chinese word *hsin,* or "heart," ended up as the name of what has become the best known of all Buddhist scriptures. Since *hsin* is the standard Chinese translation of the Sanskrit word *hridaya,* I began poking around and found three Sanskrit works whose titles also contained the word *hridaya.* Known collectively as the *hridaya shastras* (a *shastra* being an exposition of doctrine by later followers of the Buddha), these were among the most influential accounts of the Abhidharma of the Sarvastivadin sect of early Buddhism. They included a work by Dharmashri (c. 100 B.C.), another by Upashanta (C. A. D. 280), and a third by Dharmatrata (C. A. D. 320). These three shastras were considered essential reading for members of the Sarvastivadin sect, and they eventually formed the basis of an Abhidharma school in China. I couldn't help wondering if their popularity had something to do with the name change that occurred sometime between the appearance of Chih-ch'ien's *Heart Sutra* translation around A.D. 250, when he gave the text the title of *Prajnaparamita Dharani,* and 649, when Hsuan-tsang titled it *Hsin-ching,* or *Heart Sutra.*

This inquiry into titles led me to other scriptures of the Sarvastivadins, and I discovered that this early Buddhist sect had compiled the Buddha's sermons into a series of texts known as *agamas,* or "foundations." I found the *Samyukt Agama* of particular interest. Compiled around 200 B.C., this work contained all the sermons of the Buddha and his most important disciples that dealt with subjects considered worthy of meditation. What intrigued me was that this work was organized according to a sequence of subjects that corresponded exactly with the sequence that occurs in Part Two of the *Heart Sutra.* Since this sequence differs in the comparable texts of all other Buddhist sects whose canons have survived or about which we know, I couldn't help wonder if the *Heart Sutra* wasn't initially composed and didn't later receive its

more popular title in reaction to the Abhidharma of the Sarvastivadins. And this, in turn, led me to embark on an inquiry into the Abhidharma, something I had avoided ever since trying to make sense of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosha* thirty years earlier. As far as I could see at the time, the Abhidharma didn't have anything to do with Zen, and that's where I left the Abhidharma, at least until the fall of 2002.

This time I began at the beginning, with the word *abhidharma.* Some commentators have interpreted this to mean "higher dharmas," and others have insisted it means the "study of dharmas," or "dharmology." In either case, the higher dharmas that are the subject of study are the entities of the mind through which Buddhists gain their understanding of reality. According to such a conception, any given object or individual is viewed as nothing but a construct of the mind fashioned out of these *dharmas,* or building blocks of reality. In the past, some Buddhists even held that such dharmas constituted reality itself, which was true of the Sarvastivadins. But as I began exploring the Abhidharma, I soon learned that during the forty-five years of the Buddha's ministry, he taught the Abhidharma to only one of his disciples.

This occurred just before the onset of the annual monsoon in the seventh year after his Enlightenment, or in 432 B.C. (to use the dating of the Buddha established by Hajime Nakamura). In this year, while the Buddha was still in Rajgir, he told King Bimbasara that he would perform a miracle in Shravasti, the capital of the adjacent kingdom of Kaushala, under the royal gardener's mango tree. Hearing of this prediction, members of rival sects preceded the Buddha to Shravasti and cut down all the mango trees. But the royal gardener managed to find a single fruit and offered it to the Buddha. After eating the mango, the Buddha gave the seed to the gardener and asked him to plant it. Once it was in the ground, the Buddha washed his hands above the spot. As the water touched the ground, the seed sprouted into a huge tree that burst into blooms that then turned into fruit. According to Pali accounts dating back to the third century B.C. (*Patisambhidamagga* I: 125), the Buddha sat down below the tree and suddenly appeared at the center of a huge lotus flower from which his image multiplied a millionfold. Then he rose into the air with fire coming from the top half of his body and water from the bottom half. This was then reversed, with water coming from the top half and fire from the

bottom half. This process was repeated along his left side and his right side. Then the Buddha stood up and walked along a jeweled terrace that appeared in the sky. After sitting down and reclining, he finally stood back up, and as buddhas before him had done following the performance of such feats, in three great strides he ascended to Trayatrinsha Heaven at the summit of Mount Sumeru.

Trayatrinsha is Sanskrit (Pali: *Tavatimsa*) for "thirty-three." According to Buddhist cosmology this was the name of the celestial residence of thirty-three devas, including Indra, their king, and another deva whose name was Santushita. Prior to being reborn at the summit of Mount Sumeru, Santushita was Maya, Shakyamuni's mother, who died a week after giving birth. According to both Pali and Sanskrit accounts (*Atthasalini, Mahavastu* III: 115), out of compassion for his former mother, the Buddha spent the entire rainy season at the summit of Mount Sumeru teaching Santushita the conceptual system known as the Abhidharma, which is often described as "the way things appear to the mind of a buddha."

While he was on earth, the Buddha taught lessons suited to whatever audience he was addressing. But much like a doctor, his instructions were primarily intended to put an end to suffering. He never bothered trying to explain the system that formed the basis of his spiritual pharmacology, which was the Abhidharma. As later disciples and their disciples came to understand the Abhidharma, they claimed that it explained reality as a matrix (*matrika*) of dharmas, or fundamental entities of the mind, much like the table of atomic elements used in chemistry. From such a perspective, our familiar world of objects and persons was viewed as nothing but a conceptual construct fashioned out of dozens of these dharmas—seventy-five in the case of the Sarvastivadins. And to know things as they really are, a person needed to develop the ability to know the characteristics and connections among these entities. In his sermons, however, the Buddha nowhere advanced such a system, for it was simply too vast an enterprise to attempt on earth. Only on Mount Sumeru could the Buddha explain the immense and intricate scheme of the Abhidharma. This is because only such a place was sufficiently removed from the coarser levels of the Realm of Desire.

Thus, the Buddha taught the Abhidharma to Santushita at the summit of Mount Sumeru. But every day, he reappeared briefly on earth and gave his disciple, Shariputra, a summary, for a summary was all that was possible to teach or to understand on the earthly plane far below Trayatrinsha Heaven. Shariputra had distinguished himself for his wisdom, and the Buddha chose him, and him alone, to receive such instruction. Finally, after three months, the monsoon season came to an end, and the Buddha descended to earth at Sankasya, an event depicted with great imagination in Buddhist art, and he resumed his teaching but never spoke of the Abhidharma again.

Meanwhile, having heard the Buddha's complete exposition of the Abhidharma, Santushita advanced to the first stage of Buddhist attainment and became a *srota-apanna,* or one who "reaches the river," the river of impermanence. Among the Buddha's early followers, this was considered the first of three insights necessary for liberation. The other two concerned suffering and the absence of a self. While Santushita was cultivating this new awareness, far below at the earthly level of the Realm of Desire, Shariputra began compiling what he had learned into the first works on the Abhidharma. Early Buddhist schools attributed two such texts to this wisest of the Buddha's disciples: the *Sangiti-paryaya* and the *Dharma-skandha.*

The *Sangitiparyaya* is a commentary on the *Sangiti Sutra,* which is one of thirty sutras found in the *Dhirgha Agama* (cf. the Theravadin *Digha Nikaya*). This sutra was spoken in response to the disputes that arose upon the death of Mahavira, the founder of the Jain religion. To avoid similar doctrinal dissension, in this sutra Shariputra presents a list of basic concepts culled from the Buddha's sermons, and this list is approved by the Buddha as constituting the fundamentals of his teaching.

As to how this came about, Erich Frauwallner puts it this way:

> The Buddha had not preached a doctrinal system as such; he had demonstrated the path to enlightenment and had supplied the necessary theoretical justification for it. This represented the core of his message. Throughout the long years of his teaching, as he preached this message to an increasing body of followers, constantly adapting it to the capacities of his audience, certain concepts were

> also touched upon which formed a valuable complement to his basic message. However, since these concepts were dispersed throughout his sermons, they could thus be easily overlooked and gradually forgotten. Therefore, it is these concepts in particular which were collected in the *Sangiti Sutra* in order to ensure their preservation. These doctrinal concepts did not in themselves form a system. Nor was there either intention or desire to create a system from these doctrinal concepts; the aim was merely to record the words of the Buddha. But it was only natural that a recitation of the doctrine, such as the kind contained in the *Sangiti Sutra,* could not simply be confined to an enumeration of the doctrinal concepts collected in the sutra. Some form of explanation was indispensable. The explanations of the *Sangiti Sutra* were eventually recorded in written form by the Sarvastivadins, and thus came to form the *Sangitiparyaya.* (Erich Frauwallner, *Studies in Abhidharma Literature,* pp. 14-15)

Although these explanations were attributed to Shariputra, they were continually revised and new interpretations added. Still, for such early Buddhist schools as the Sarvastivadins, Shariputra was the fount of all wisdom concerning the Abhidharma.

The *Dharmaskandha* was another seminal work attributed to Shariputra, and it was also composed around lists of basic concepts. However, here we are no longer dealing with a mere enumeration but with groups of concepts, concepts that were considered important for the practice of liberation or significant with regard to entanglement in the cycle of existence. Scholars have noted the similarity of the *Dharmaskandha* to the *Vibhanga,* a Pali Abhidharma text of equal importance to the early Sthaviravadins (ancestors of the Theravadins). Comparing the two, Frauwallner concludes, "We are thus dealing with a work from the period before the Pali (ed. Sthaviravada) and the Sarvastivada schools separated, a work which was then taken over and transmitted by both schools. Thus the *Dharmaskandha* proves to be a very early work from the time before King Ashoka's missions and can therefore also be regarded as the Sarvastivadin's earliest Abhidharma work after the *Sangitiparyaya.* But it takes the *Sangitiparyaya* 's superficial compilation of lists and constitutes the first individual work of the Sarvastivada school" (ibid., p.

20). Karl Potter reverses the temporal order of these two texts but agrees that both were compiled around 300 B.C. (*Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies,* vol. 7, p. 179). Regardless of which text came first, both were among the earliest and most important works of the Sarvastivadins, and both were attributed to Shariputra.

This digression has been necessary not only to explain the focus of the *Heart Sutra* on the Abhidharma of the Sarvastivadins but also to explain the appearance of Shariputra in the text. Anyone who wanted to challenge the Sarvastivadin conception of the Dharma could do no better than to question Shariputra's understanding of the basic categories of the Abhidharma. And there could be no better person to do this than the Buddha's mother, or rather her incarnation as Santushita, for Santushita heard the entire Abhidharma, while Shariputra heard only summaries. With this in mind, I could not help but conclude that Avalokiteshvara must then be a subsequent incarnation of Santushita. As noted earlier, Avalokiteshvara follows the same sequence of Abhidharma categories used by the Sarvastivadins themselves to organize their *Samyukt Agama,* beginning with a consideration of the Five Skandhas, then continuing with the Twelve Abodes of Sensation and Eighteen Elements of Perception, the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, the Four Truths, and finally the attainment and status of practitioners who follow the Buddhist path.

This conclusion, however, was just the beginning of my altered understanding of this heart of Prajnaparamita. The teaching of Prajnaparamita is also represented in the form of a goddess of the same name who has long been known as the "mother of buddhas." She is called the "mother of buddhas" because buddhas become buddhas as a result of their ability to penetrate and be transformed by this teaching, which is considered equivalent to the *dharma-kaya,* or body of reality. But if Prajnaparamita is the *dharma-kaya,* then Santushita must represent its realization, or *sanbhoga-kaya,* and Avalokiteshvara must be its manifestation, or *nirmana-kaya,* and the *Heart Sutra* must then be Prajnaparamita's womb, with our conception and subsequent birth made possible by the mantra at the end of the sutra.

A mantra is like a magic lamp, which itself is often cast in the shape of a

womb. But instead of bringing forth a genie, as other mantras are intended to do, this mantra draws us inside, where we become the genie. Chanting this mantra thus creates the womb from which we are reborn as buddhas. This, then, is how my understanding of this sutra has changed over the past year. Altogether quite unexpected, but nevertheless inescapable.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

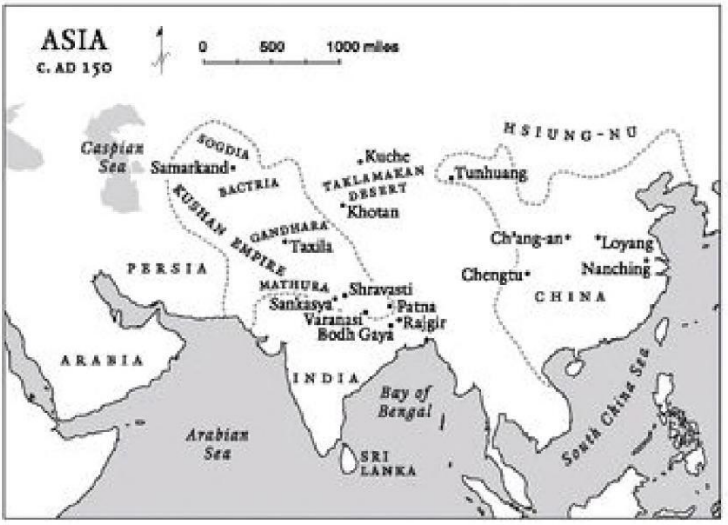
The *Heart Sutra* hardly fills a page, and yet it is the best known of the thousands of scriptures in the Buddhist Canon. Its fame, though, is relatively recent in terms of Buddhist history and didn't begin until a thousand years after the Buddha's Nirvana. During the chaos that occurred in China between the collapse of the Sui (581-618) and the rise of the T'ang dynasty (618-907), many people fled the country's twin capitals of Loyang and Ch'ang-an and sought refuge in Chengtu, the capital of the southwest province of Szechuan. Among the refugees was a Buddhist novice still in his teens. One day this novice befriended a man who was impoverished and ill, and the man, in turn, taught him the words of the *Heart Sutra.* Not long afterward, the novice was ordained a monk, and several years later, in 629, he embarked on one of the great journeys of Chinese history.

The young monk's name was Hsuan-tsang, and he set out on the Silk Road for India in search of answers to questions concerning the Buddha's teaching that this world is nothing but mind. In the course of his journey, Hsuan-tsang is said to have traveled 10,000 miles—west across the Taklamakan Desert to Samarkand, south over the Hindu Kush to the Buddhist center of Taxila, and down the Ganges into India and back again. And time and again, he turned to the *Heart Sutra* to ward off demons, dust storms, and bandits. When he finally returned to China in 645, he was welcomed back by the emperor, and stories about the power of the *Heart Sutra* began making the rounds.

This account about how Hsuan-tsang first encountered the sutra was recorded by Hui-li (b. 614) in his biography of Hsuan-tsang written in 688. Several decades later, the Tantric master Amoghavajra (705-774) embellished this earlier account in a preface to the *Heart Sutra* preserved on a manuscript

found at Tunhuang in Northwest China; this manuscript (S2464) had been sealed in a cave shrine with thousands of other Buddhist, Taoist, and Zoroastrian scriptures in the eleventh century, and was rediscovered 900 years later in the early twentieth century. Although Amoghavajra's version was clearly fanciful and historically inaccurate, it became the seed from which sprang the series of stories about Hsuan-tsang that eventually resulted in the Ming dynasty novel *Journey to the West* (cf. Victor Mair, "The Heart Sutra and The Journey to the West"). Hsuan-tsang also produced his own translation of the *Heart Sutra* in 649, and it wasn't long afterward that the first commentaries began appearing, as his fellow monks realized that not only was this a scripture of great power, but its summary of Buddhist teaching provided the perfect platform from which to offer their own interpretations of the Dharma.

Since then, the *Heart Sutra* has become the most popular of all Buddhist scriptures, and yet no one knows where it came from or who was responsible for its composition. Its earliest recorded appearance was in the form of a Chinese translation made by a Central Asian monk sometime between A.D. 200 and 250. The monk's name was Chih-ch'ien, and he was a disciple of Chih-liang, who was a disciple of Chih-lou-chia-ch'an (Lokakshema). The *Chih* at the beginning of these monks' names indicated that they were not Chinese, but Yueh-chih. During the second century B.C., one branch of this nomadic tribe migrated westward from their ancestral home along China's northwest border and settled in the upper reaches of the Oxus River (Amu Darya). In the following century, they spread south across the Hindu Kush, and by A.D. 150 they controlled a territory that included all of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and most of Northern India, as well as parts of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Since their territory straddled both sides of the Hindu Kush, it was known as the Kushan Empire, and it was one of the great empires of the ancient world.



In their conquest of this region, the Yueh-chih made use of a network of roads first created by the Mauryan Empire (321-181 B.C.) of Candragupta and Ashoka and expanded by a series of short-lived dynasties ruled by Bactrian Greeks, Scythians, and Parthians. This network also served the purpose of administrative control and provided the revenue from merchants and guilds that financed the Kushan state. The same guilds and merchants also supported hundreds, if not thousands, of Buddhist monasteries along the same network of roads and towns, and Buddhism flourished under the Kushans. King Kanishka (fl. A.D. 100-125) even put the images of Shakyamuni and Maitreya Buddha on his coins.

Although Buddhist monks began arriving in China as early as the first century B.C., it wasn't until the height of the Kushan Empire, or around A.D. 150, that they began translating the texts they brought with them or that others brought to China on their behalf. The Yueh-chih monk Chih-lou-chia-ch'an is said to have begun working in the Han dynasty capital of Loyang around this time on some of the earliest known scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism, including the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines.* Between A.D. 200 and 250, his disciple's disciple, Chih-ch'ien, also translated a number

of Mahayana scriptures, including the first translations of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* and the *Longer Sukhavativyuha Sutra* of Pure Land Buddhism, as well as a second rendition of the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* and the first translation of the *Heart Sutra,* which he titled the *Prajnaparamita Dharani.*

In his *Maha Prajnaparamita Shastra,* written at the end of the second century A. D., Nagarjuna says the ideas and inspiration of such early Mahayana scriptures, if not the scriptures themselves, originated in Southern India and later spread west and then north. Most of Northern India was controlled by the Kushans during this period, and such teachings and scriptures would have moved easily along the trade routes under their control through what are now Pakistan and Afghanistan, then north through Uzbekistan, and finally east along the major arteries of the Silk Road to China.

Although the teachings that make up the Prajnaparamita are thought to have originated in Southern India in the first or second century B.C., the *Heart Sutra* was most likely composed during the first century A.D. further north, in the territories under the control of the Kushans: if not in Bactria (Afghanistan) or Gandhara (Pakistan) then perhaps in Sogdia (Uzbekistan) or Mathura (India's Uttar Pradesh).

Not long after Ashoka inherited the Mauryan throne in 268 B.C., he sent Sarvastivadin missionaries to Gandhara. Ashoka had been governor of Gandhara during the reign of his grandfather, Candragupta, and his decision to send Sarvastivadin monks there was a sign of favor. The cities in this part of India were at the center of a network of transcontinental trade routes and among the richest in the subcontinent. Thus, it is not surprising that the Sarvastivadins soon became the dominant Buddhist sect in this region. Over the course of the next several centuries, preferential patronage by merchants and the ruling elite extended their dominance beyond Gandhara to Bactria, Sogdia, and Mathura—basically the boundaries of the Kushan Empire. And since the *Heart Sutra* was clearly organized as a response to the teachings of the Sarvastivadins, it was probably a Sarvastivadin monk (or former Sarvastivadin monk) in this region who composed the *Heart Sutra* upon realizing the limitations of the Sarvastivadin Abhidharma. This was Edward Conze's conclusion concerning other Prajnaparamita texts (cf. *The*

Prajnaparamita Literature, p. 94), and most likely it was also the case with the *Heart Sutra.*

As noted above, the *Heart Sutra*'s earliest appearance was in the form of a Chinese translation made by Chih-ch'ien sometime between A.D. 200 and 250. This was followed by a second version by Kumarajiva around A.D. 400. In his translations, Kumarajiva often incorporated whole sections of Chih-ch'ien's earlier work, and he may have done so on this occasion as well. We'll probably never know. Chih-ch'ien's translation was listed as missing as early as A. D. 519. Hence, it must have been Kumarajiva's version that Hsuan-tsang first learned to chant as a young novice. Later, after returning from India, he produced his own translation of the *Heart Sutra.* But except for making a few character changes peculiar to him and deleting a few phrases negating the Sarvastivadin conception of time, Hsuan-tsang followed Kumarajiva's translation word for word, which is what we would expect of a text whose spiritual efficacy Hsuan-tsang had witnessed firsthand and whose wording he was, no doubt, reluctant to alter. More than a decade after publishing his own version of the *Heart Sutra,* Hsuan-tsang and his assistants also completed a translation of the encyclopedic collection of Perfection of Wisdom texts that make up the *Maha Prajnaparamita Sutra,* including the fourth and final Chinese version of the *Perfection of Wisdom in Twenty-five Thousand Lines,* which, for the sake of brevity, I will follow Conze in referring to as the *Large Sutra.*

What has come to interest some scholars of late is that the first half of Kumarajiva's and Hsuan-tsang's translations of the *Heart Sutra* also appears in an expanded guise in their translations of the *Large Sutra.* This would not be unusual, especially since the *Large Sutra* is a collection of many separate texts and the passage in question is quite short, amounting to only about eight lines in the Chinese Tripitaka (or lines 5-20 in my *Heart Sutra* translation).

But while Kumarajiva's and Hsuan-tsang's Chinese translations of certain lines in these two passages are identical, scholars have noticed that the surviving Sanskrit versions of the corresponding lines differ in these two sutras. Although the significance of such differences depends on one's point of view, it has been argued that because they are alike in Chinese but different in Sanskrit, the most likely scenario was that the first half of the Chinese *Heart*

Sutra was extracted and condensed from the Chinese *Large Sutra,* additional material added to the beginning (where the Buddha is replaced by Avalokiteshvara) and a mantra (already in circulation) added to the end, and the resulting Chinese text then taken to India, where it was translated into Sanskrit, resulting in the differences we see today in the Sanskrit *Heart Sutra* and the Sanskrit *Large Sutra.* Eventually, so this theory goes, the Sanskrit translation made its way back to China, where it was translated by others into Chinese again. A full account of this rather convoluted argument appears in Jan Nattier's article "The *Heart Sutra*: A Chinese Apocryphal Text?" (in *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies,* 1992, pp. 153-223).

Despite the brilliance and depth of scholarship involved in Nattier's presentation of this thesis, we are shown no proof that the *Heart Sutra* was originally composed or compiled in Chinese, that any part of the first half was extracted from the *Large Sutra* or any other Chinese text, or that the mantra was added later. Instead, we are asked to believe that this is what must have happened because certain lines in the two Chinese texts agree and those in the two corresponding extant Sanskrit texts don't, and it should be the other way around, with the Sanskrit texts agreeing and the Chinese texts diverging in the usual course of translation.

My own solution to this apparent inconsistency is to assume that the lines in question in the Sanskrit texts of the *Heart Sutra* and the *Large Sutra* used by Kumarajiva and Hsuan-tsang were identical. Thus, there was no need, nor any basis, for divergence in the Chinese. In fact, there is no evidence, only speculation, that the two Sanskrit texts used by Kumarajiva and Hsuan-tsang differed at the time they made their translations of this passage in these two sutras. The differences we see today in the two Sanskrit texts, I would suggest, were the result of subsequent corruption or simply reflect the existence of variant editions.

Conze noted that the *Large Sutra* must have existed in a variety of versions (*The Prajnaparamita Literature,* p. 35), and this is also the conclusion of Shogo Watanabe (cf. "A Comparative Study of the *Pancavinshatisahasrika Prajnaparamita*" in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society,* 1994, pp. 386-396). This variation among Sanskrit editions is further reflected in the differences

in the Chinese translations of the *Large Sutra* by Dharmaraksha in A. D. 286, Mokshala in A. D. 291, Kumarajiva in A.D. 404, and Hsuan-tsang in A.D. 663, where it is sometimes hard to believe these four monks were translating the same text. For example, Dharmaraksha's translation occupies 70 pages in the standard edition of the Tripitaka, Mokshala's 146 pages, Kumarajiva's 208 pages, and Hsuan-tsang's 426 pages. Thus, we have to ask why we should believe a scenario involving one version of the Sanskrit *Large Sutra,* when there must have been at least half a dozen versions of varying lengths and textual coherence in circulation.

It is far easier to believe that the Sanskrit copy of the *Large Sutra* unearthed in Gilgit on which Nattier bases her argument has undergone sufficient corruption to account for the divergence. For example, in one of the two sets of linguistic anomalies cited by Nattier in support of her thesis (where part of the *Heart Sutra* occurs in Chapter Three of the *Large Sutra*), the Gilgit text misunderstands the subject, referring the categories of line 11 to "emptiness" rather than "dharmas" in the light of emptiness. That this is a corruption is evident from its divergence from the teaching of the chapter in which this passage occurs. Leaving aside the issue of how one extracts a coherent text (namely, the *Heart Sutra*) from a corrupt text, we should not be surprised to find agreement between two Chinese texts and disagreement between the Sanskrit texts upon which they were supposedly based when one of the Sanskrit texts is either corrupt or represents a textual tradition different from the one on which the Chinese translation was actually based.

I have lingered at length over this matter because the contention that the *Heart Sutra* was originally compiled in China, albeit of Sanskrit pieces originally brought from India, has found a number of advocates among prominent buddhologists. Hopefully, as ancient manuscripts continue to be unearthed (alas, by explosives and those seeking sanctuary) in the region where this sutra was most likely composed, we may well see evidence someday that will clarify this issue of origin. Until then, we will have to make do with the knowledge that whoever composed this sutra bestowed on us all a great blessing.

In the years that followed the appearance of Hsuan-tsang's *Heart Sutra,* this

text continued to attract the attention of translators. Fang K'uang-ch'ang lists twenty-one different versions in Chinese (cf. *Po-jo-hsin-ching yi-chu-chi-ch'eng,* pp. iii-xv). Although the translations of Chih-ch'ien (c. 250), Bodhiruchi (693), and Shikshananda (c. 700) have disappeared, those that have survived include one made around 735 by Fa-yueh. His was the first translation of a longer version of the sutra that included an introduction and a conclusion. This longer version, however, was clearly an attempt to give the text the stature of a standard sutra, and few Buddhists or buddhologists have accepted it as the sutra's original form. Hence, I have not used it as the basis of my own translation or commentary but have appended a translation of it to the end of this book for reference.

Not only has the *Heart Sutra* attracted the interest of translators, it has also been the subject of numerous commentaries. In Chinese alone, over one hundred are recorded prior to modern times, and of these more than eighty still exist. As the *Heart Sutra* was not well-known prior to Hsuan-tsang's translation of 649, no commentaries are recorded during the first four hundred years of its existence in China—though we do have a Chinese translation of one attributed to Deva, who lived in India in the third century. Also, no commentaries prior to the eighth century have survived in Sanskrit or Tibetan. (The fact that no early commentaries are known is cited by Nattier as further proof that the *Heart Sutra* is of late Chinese origin, despite the fact that few commentaries exist in Chinese, Sanskrit, or Tibetan for any sutra prior to this period.)

More recently, the *Heart Sutra* has seen renewed interest, and over the past several decades dozens of expositions have appeared in European as well as Asian languages. In compiling my own explanation of the text, I have consulted a number of these works and have translated selected remarks from about a dozen Chinese commentaries, mostly from the T'ang and Ming dynasties. For reference, after each line of text in the commentary I have included the romanized Sanskrit based on Edward Conze's 1967 edition of the sutra and also the Chinese translation of Hsuan-tsang.

In his *Heart Sutra* commentary, Ming-k'uang says, "The Buddhadharma is not far off. It's as close as your mind. Reality is not somewhere outside. How

can you find it, if you turn away from yourself? Whether you're deluded or awake depends upon you. Make up your mind, and you will be there. Whether you're in the light or in the dark doesn't depend on others. Have faith and practice, and you will soon know the truth. If you don't take the medicine of the Great Physician, when will you see the light of the sun?"

Fa-tsang says, "The *Heart Sutra* is a great torch that lights the darkest road, a swift boat that ferries us across the sea of suffering."

Red Pine
New Year's Day, Year of the Monkey
Port Townsend, Washington

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The Heart Sutra

Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sutran

般若波羅蜜多心經

PRAJNAPARAMITA 般若波羅蜜多

THE TEACHING of this sutra is known as *prajnaparamita.* The word *prajna* is Sanskrit for "wisdom" and is a combination of *pra,* meaning "before," and *jna,* meaning "to know." From the same combination, the Greeks got *pro-gnosis.* But while the Greeks referred to the knowledge of what lies before us, namely the future course of events, the Buddhists of ancient India referred to what comes before knowledge. Shunryu Suzuki called it "beginner's mind."

In the centuries after the Buddha's Nirvana, however, the focus of cultivation was on knowledge, *jnana,* rather than *prajna.* The members of the earliest Buddhist sects held that reality was a complex system of dharmas that could be known and that liberation depended on such knowledge. One of the earliest and most important texts of the Sarvastivadins was Katyayaniputra's *Abhidharma Jnana-prasthana* (The Source of Knowledge through the Study of Dharmas), which was compiled around 200 B.C. and which set forth a matrix of dharmas as the basis of all that we know or can know. It would appear that it was in reaction to this emphasis on *jnana* that the compilation of *prajna* texts occurred, focusing on wisdom as opposed to knowledge. Although opinions vary as to when the text before us was compiled, the use of *prajna* in the title tells us this is a text that goes beyond the analysis of reality into discrete, knowable entities, such as those used by the Sarvastivadins. Thus, Zen masters ask their students to show them their original face, their face before they were born.

Buddhists distinguish three levels of prajna, or wisdom. The first level is mundane wisdom, which views what is impermanent as permanent, what is impure as pure, and what has no self as having a self. This form of wisdom is common to the beings of every world, and despite its erroneous nature, it is by this means that most beings live out their lives.

The second level of prajna is metaphysical wisdom, which views what appears to be permanent as impermanent, what appears to be pure as impure, and what appears to have a self as having no self. This is the higher wisdom of those who cultivate meditation and philosophy and is characteristic of such early Buddhist sects as the Sarvastivadins. Despite providing its possessors with insight into a higher reality, such wisdom remains rooted in dialectics and does not result in enlightenment. At best it leads to an end of passion and no further rebirth.

The third level of prajna is transcendent wisdom, which views all things, whether mundane or metaphysical, as neither permanent nor impermanent, as neither pure nor impure, as neither having a self nor not having a self, as inconceivable and inexpressible. While mundane wisdom and metaphysical wisdom result in attachment to views, and thus knowledge, transcendent wisdom remains free of views because it is based on the insight that all things, both objects and dharmas, are empty of anything self-existent. Thus, nothing can be characterized as permanent, pure, or having a self. And yet, neither can anything be characterized as impermanent, impure, or lacking a self. This is because there is nothing to which we might point and say, "This is permanent or impermanent, this is pure or impure, this has a self or does not have a self." Such ineffable wisdom was not unknown among early Buddhists, but, if the written record is any indication, it did not attract much attention until such scriptures as the *Heart Sutra* began to appear four or five hundred years after the Buddha's Nirvana.

To distinguish this third level of *prajna* from mundane and metaphysical wisdom, it was called *prajna-paramita.* According to early commentators, there were two possible derivations, and thus meanings, for *paramita.* In Prajnaparamita scriptures like the *Diamond Sutra,* it is evident from usage elsewhere in the same text that the author derived *paramita* from *parama,*

meaning "highest point," and that *paramita* means "perfection." Thus, *prajna-paramita* means "perfection of wisdom." But we can also deduce from the use of *para* in the mantra at the end of the *Heart Sutra* that the author of this text interpreted the word *paramita* as a combination of *para,* meaning "beyond," and *ita,* meaning "gone," and read the *m* after *para* as an accusative case ending. Thus, according to this interpretation, *paramita* means "what has gone beyond" or "what is transcendent" or, according to Chinese translators and commentators, "what leads us to the other shore." Also, because *ita* here is feminine, *paramita* means "she who has gone beyond" or "she who leads us to the other shore," the "she" in this case referring to Prajnaparamita, the personified Goddess of Wisdom. Commentators have long been divided over these two interpretations. Since both have their merits, I have used both. But I have also avoided both and have usually taken refuge in transliteration.

In addition to viewing prajna as having three levels, Buddhists distinguished three aspects: wisdom as language, wisdom as insight, and wisdom as true appearance. According to this conception, language provides the means by which insight arises. And insight perceives true appearance.

Chen-k'o says, "There are three kinds of prajna: prajna as true appearance, as insight, and as language. The prajna of true appearance is the mind possessed by all beings. The prajna of insight is the light of the mind. Once someone awakens, the light of the mind shines forth. And anything composed of words and phrases, regardless of its length, if it contains the wisdom of the ancients and dispels the darkness of ignorance, is called the prajna of language.

"Wisdom and delusion basically aren't different. This shore and the other shore essentially have the same source. But because someone thinks the body and the mind exist, we say they are deluded and they dwell on this shore. And because someone doesn't think the body and the mind exist, we say they are wise and they dwell on the other shore."

In discussing these three aspects in his *Diamond Sutra* commentary, Yin-shun says, "True appearances are not something that can be expressed by ordinary conceptions or everyday language. So how can we say they are empty or that they exist, much less argue about them? Nevertheless, true

appearances do not exist apart from anything else. Hence, we shouldn't speak of them as separate from language. At the same time, if we don't rely on speech, we have no other means to lead beings from attachment toward understanding. Thus, as long as we aren't misled by provisional names when we speak of the nature of dharmas, there is no harm in using 'existence' or 'emptiness' to describe them. Some people say true appearances are objective truth, which isn't created by the Buddha or by anyone else but is realized by insight. Others say true appearances transcend such dialectics—that they are the absolute, subjective mind—the mind's self-nature. Actually, they are neither subjective nor objective, nor is there any 'realization' or 'true mind' we can even speak of!"

Te-ch'ing says, "What is the meaning of 'prajna' in the title of this sutra? This is Sanskrit for 'wisdom.' And what is the meaning of 'paramita'? This is also Sanskrit and means 'to reach the other shore.' The meaning is that the suffering of sansara is like a great ocean, and the desires and thoughts of beings are boundless. Ignorant and unaware, their waves of consciousness swell and give rise to doubt and karma and the cycle of birth and death, to bitterness that has no limit and from which they cannot escape. This is what is meant by 'this shore.' The Buddha used the light of great wisdom to shine through the dust of desire and to put an end to suffering once and for all. To cross the sea of sansara and to realize nirvana is what is meant by 'the other shore.'"

Pao-t'ung says, "The sutras say to cross a river we need a raft, but once we reach the other shore, we no longer need it. If a person resolves to find their true source and plumbs the depths of reason and nature, they will see their original face and instantly awaken to what is unborn. This is to reach the other shore. And once they are there, they are there forever. They don't need to return again. They will be free spirits unconcerned with material things, and they will be happy and at peace. Chia-shan said, 'The Tao is everywhere.' He also said, 'When you see form, you see the mind.' But people only see form. They don't see the mind. If you can look into the depths and think about what you are doing one action at a time, you will suddenly see. This is called seeing your nature. You can't know this nature through knowledge. You can't perceive it through perception. This nature has no form or appearance. When

you don't see it, you see it. When you see it, you don't see it."

Fa-tsang says, "According to the *Maha Prajnaparamita Shastra,* 'Just as the great peak of Mount Sumeru does not quake for no or just any reason, the same holds for the appearance of the teaching of prajna.' Although many reasons might be given, I will briefly mention ten. First, it destroys the erroneous views of other sects; second, it leads followers of lesser paths toward the Mahayana; third, it keeps beginning bodhisattvas from becoming lost in emptiness; fourth, it helps them realize the middle way between relative and absolute truths and gives rise to balanced views; fifth, it reveals the glorious merit of the Buddha and engenders true faith; sixth, it inspires them to set their minds on enlightenment; seventh, it leads them to cultivate the profound and all-inclusive practices of a bodhisattva; eighth, it cuts through all serious obstructions; ninth, it results in the fruits of enlightenment and nirvana; and tenth, it continues to benefit beings in future ages. These are ten of the many reasons why this teaching has flourished. In the Dharma, we have the two categories of substance and function. *Prajna* is its substance and means 'wisdom.' It is insight into the mysterious and realization of the true source. *Paramita* is its function and means 'to reach the other shore.' By means of this marvelous wisdom one transcends birth and death and reaches the realm of true emptiness."

Several Chinese translations add the word *mo-ho,* for *maha,* or "great," to the beginning of this sutra's title. Although such usage appears in some citations of Chih-ch'ien's translation of circa A.D. 200-250 and in most citations of Kumarajiva's translation of circa A. D. 400, it does not appear in any other Chinese translation or Sanskrit copy that I am aware of. Hence, I have not included it. Another word I have omitted is *bhagavati,* which is generally understood as meaning "she who bestows prosperity" and, hence, "bountiful." Being in the feminine, it modifies *Prajnaparamita,* the personified Goddess of Wisdom. However, it does not appear in any Sanskrit copy or Chinese translation from Sanskrit and apparently exists only in the Tibetan.

HRIDAYA

In his *Sanskrit-English Dictionary,* Monier-Williams has this for *hridaya,* the "h" of which is nearly silent: "the heart or center or core or essence or best or dearest or most secret part of anything." In titles, *hridaya* usually indicates that the work is a summary. However, prior to Hsuan-tsang's translation of 649, the *Heart Sutra* does not appear to have had the word *hridaya* in its title; rather it was known as the *Prajnaparamita Dharani* (Chihch'ien's translation) or the *Maha Prajnaparamita Mahavidya Dharani* (Kumarajiva's translation). Thus, sometime between the fifth and seventh centuries, the text picked up the title by means of which it has been known ever since.

My guess is that the use of *heart* in the title was in response to the series of Sarvastivadin texts that began with Dharmashri's groundbreaking *Abhidharma Hridaya Shastra* (Treatise on the Heart of the Abhidharma), composed in Bactria (Afghanistan) around 100 B.C. This was followed by a text of the same title (and much the same material) written by Upashanta around A. D. 280 and another by Dharmatrata around A.D. 320 entitled *Samyukt Abhidharma Hridaya Shastra* (Commentary on the Heart of the Abhidharma Shastra). These last two texts were written in Gandhara (Pakistan), and it might have been the second of the two that inspired the change in the title, as it was the most influential Abhidharma text of its day in the same area where many Mahayana texts are thought to have originated.

Another possible explanation for the presence of the word *hridaya* in the title is that it was added to reflect the primary use of this text as an incantation. While most commentators have explained the appearance of *hridaya* as indicating that this text is a summary of the teaching of Prajnaparamita, Fukui Fumimasa has shown that the word *hsin,* which is the standard Chinese translation of *hridaya,* appears in titles of other texts meant to be chanted and refers not to a summary but to the view that dharanis form the heart of Buddhist practice (cf. *Hannya shingyo no kenkyu*). A dharani, or mantra, is an incantation that possesses protective powers, and the *Heart Sutra* was clearly seen in this light from the very beginning, as the first two translations included the word *dharani* in their titles. Thus, during the T'ang dynasty (618-906), most Chinese referred to it as the *T'o-hsin-ching,* or *Dharani Heart Sutra,* and one of our earliest records of this text concerns its use by Hsuan-tsang to protect him during his travels.

Jnanamitra says, "Regarding *hridaya,* there is nothing profound or sublime in the *Perfection of Wisdom in One Hundred Thousand Lines* that is not contained in this small sutra" (Donald Lopez, *Elaborations on Emptiness,* p. 142).

Chen-k'o says, "This sutra is the principal thread that runs through the entire Buddhist Tripitaka. Although a person's body includes many organs and bones, the heart is the most important."

Te-ch'ing says, "What is meant by 'heart' is simply the heart of great wisdom that leads to the other shore and not the lump of flesh of mortal beings or their deluded mind. But because mortals are unaware they already have a heart that possesses the light of wisdom, they only see the shadows that result from their delusions. Instead, they take a lump made of flesh and blood as their real heart and cling to this body of flesh and blood as their possession and use it to perform all kinds of wicked deeds. They wander through life after life and thought after thought without a moment of self-reflection. The days and months go by, they live and die and die and live, and always subject to karma, always subject to suffering. How can they ever escape? Because the Buddha was able to realize his original true wisdom, he saw through the body and mind of the Five Skandhas as never really existing and essentially empty, and he instantly reached the other shore and crossed the sea of suffering. And because of his compassion for those who are lost, he returned to lead them through this dharma door of self-realization so that everyone might see that they already possess wisdom and that their delusions are basically void and that their body and mind are empty and that the world is but an illusion. Therefore he taught this sutra so that they might not do evil deeds but escape sansara and the sea of suffering and reach the bliss of nirvana."

SUTRA

The Sanskrit word *sutra* is usually interpreted as deriving from the root *siv,* meaning "to sew," and as referring to a "thread" that holds things together, like the English word *suture.* However, some scholars have suggested that it might instead come from *sukta,* meaning "wise saying." Whatever its

derivation, *sutra* was used by Brahmans and Jains as well as Buddhists to denote a scripture. According to the traditional account, Buddhist sutras date back to the First Council, which was held in Rajgir in the months immediately after the Buddha's Nirvana in 383 B. C. Many scholars now believe such an account was a later fabrication by early Buddhist sects anxious to authenticate their selections and interpretations of the Buddha's teachings. But whether or not such an event took place, these early sects applied the word *sutra* not only to discourses of the Buddha but also to discourses on the Abhidharma by later followers as well. As time went on, however, the word *shastra,* meaning "investigation," was used for Abhidharma texts, and the word *sutra* was reserved for sermons of the Buddha or disciples empowered by him to speak on his behalf.

In the case of the *Heart Sutra,* the text before us was not considered a *ching* or "sutra" until Hsuan-tsang's translation of 649. Prior to that, the text was considered a mantra or dharani, as reflected in the earlier translations of the title by Chih-ch'ien and Kumarajiva. Also, it is worth noting that none of our extant Sanskrit copies includes the word *sutra* in the title, and it is only reflected in the Chinese and Tibetan. However, since it has been customary for the past thousand years or so to refer to this as a "sutra," I have retained this word in the title.

Chen-k'o says, "A sutra points out what is constant and also points out a road. Demons and members of other sects cannot obstruct or destroy what is constant. Fools and sages all arrive by means of such a road."

Hui-ching says, "The purest emptiness has no image but is the source of all images. The subtlest reasoning has no words but is the origin of all words. Thus, images come from no image, and words come from no word. These words that are no words arise in response to beings, and these images that are no image appear according to the mind. By means of words that are no words, bodhisattvas spread their teaching. And by means of images that are no image, buddhas appear in the world. This sutra is thus the jewel of all teachings."

Part One

Prajnaparamita

1. THE NOBLE AVALOKITESHVARA BODHISATTVA: *arya avalokiteshvaro bodhisattvo* 觀自在菩薩

WITH THIS PHRASE the sutra begins, but nowhere are we told who heard or recorded these words. Most Buddhists attribute the memorization and recounting of the Buddha's teachings to his attendant, Ananda. But this is not one of the Buddha's sermons, and there is no mention of Ananda or any of the Buddha's disciples, other than Shariputra. The longer version of this sutra begins with the Buddha entering samadhi and with Shariputra asking Avalokiteshvara how to practice the Prajnaparamita. The shorter version, translated here, is Avalokiteshvara's answer. The longer version, however, did not appear until after the shorter version had become an established text. Hence, most scholars agree it was an attempt to establish the authority of the sutra by providing it with the standard introduction and conclusion in which the Buddha is present and the presence of his attendant with the unfailing memory is, thus, implied.

The question of authorship was an important one for early Buddhists concerned with authenticity. But over the centuries it has become less so. Nowadays Buddhists resolve this issue by considering the teaching contained in the text on its own merits. Accordingly, the principle of the Four Reliances (*catuh-pratisarana*) has developed to deal with this issue: We are urged to rely on the teaching and not the author, the meaning and not the letter, the truth and not the convention, the knowledge and not the information. Thus, if a teaching accords with the Dharma, then the teacher must have been a buddha or someone empowered by a buddha to speak on his or her behalf. For our part, all we can safely claim is that the author of this sutra was someone with an understanding of the major Buddhist traditions of two thousand years ago, the ability to summarize their salient points in the briefest fashion possible, and the knowledge of where buddhas come from.

The word *arya* (noble) originated with members of the nomadic tribe who referred to themselves as Aryas (Aryans) and who crossed the Hindu Kush and

occupied the Indus Valley around 1500 B.C. A thousand years later, during the Buddha's day, the term *arya* was applied as an honorific to any person of high esteem, and among Buddhists it was used to salute bodhisattvas as well as the shravakas that Mahayana Buddhists would later denigrate as followers of the Hinayana, or Lesser Path. Thus, it was applied to heroes of early Buddhism regardless of their sectarian affiliation.

The term *bodhisattva* is usually explained as "a being (*sattva*) of enlightenment (*bodhi*)." But *sattva* also means something akin to "warrior," and a number of scholars have suggested the original meaning of *bodhisattva* was tantamount to "champion of enlightenment." In either case, the main advantage in using the term *bodhisattva* was that it represented a change in the focus of practice from nirvana, which was the goal of shravakas, to enlightenment. Thus, it eventually became the standard form of reference for the paragons of Mahayana practice, as opposed to the shravakas of the Hinayana.

Shravaka means "one who hears" and originally referred to those disciples who actually heard the Buddha speak. Later, it was extended to include the members of such early sects as the Sarvastivadins. And later still, it was used pejoratively by Mahayana Buddhists in reference to those who sought nirvana for themselves without concern for the liberation of others. It should be noted, though, that this depiction of the Hinayana was a Mahayana invention and doubtlessly included a certain amount of distortion of the actual practice of those at whom it was aimed, namely monks and nuns who followed the letter and not the spirit of the Dharma. Thus, a shravaka was often described as one who merely *heard* the teachings of the Buddha but did not put them into practice.

In the longer version of this sutra, the term *mahasattva* appears in apposition to *bodhisattva,* as it often does in Mahayana sutras. Literally, this means "great being" or "great hero," depending on how one understands *sattva.* Its earliest reference, however, was not to humans but to lions. Only later was it applied to those who shared the courage of the king of beasts. Although the term *bodhisattva* was used by other religious sects before the advent of Buddhism, the compound *bodhisattva-mahasattva* was used

exclusively by Buddhists. It appears in such early Mahayana texts as the *Ratnaguna-sancaya Gatha,* a Prajnaparamita text usually given a date of circa 100 B.C. But I have also found it in the *Samyukt Agama* (1177), a sutra compilation of the Sarvastivadins dating back to 200 B.C., if not earlier.

The noble bodhisattva who delivers this teaching is not just any bodhisattva but the most revered bodhisattva in the entire Buddhist pantheon and the only bodhisattva with both male and female identities. The name *Avalokiteshvara* is compounded of four parts: the verbal prefix *ava,* which means "down"; the verb *lok,* which means "to look"; the suffix *ita,* which changes the verb *avalok* (to look down) into a noun (one who looks down); and finally *ishvara,* which means "lord" or "master." In accordance with the rules of sound combination, *ishvara* becomes *eshvara,* and the four parts together mean "Master of Looking Down" or "Lord Who Looks Down." Also, the short *a* at the end of *ishvara* indicates that the name is masculine. If it were feminine, *ishvara* would become *ishvari.* In Chinese texts, Avalokiteshvara is usually translated *Kuan-tzu-tsai* (Master of Looking Down), which was the rendering preferred by Hsuan-tsang.

In some Sanskrit texts this bodhisattva's name was also written Avalokitasvara. In such cases, it was translated into Chinese as *Kuan-yin,* meaning "He/She Who Looks Down Upon Sound (Cries)," or as *Kuan-shih-yin,* meaning "He/She Who Looks Down Upon the Sounds (Cries) of the World," which was the rendering preferred by Kumarajiva. According to this variation, *ava-lok-ita* is read as above, but *ishvara* is changed into *a-svara,* meaning "low, indistinct voice," or read as equivalent to *ahrsvara,* meaning "the sound of lamentation." While such etymological gymnastics are always possible in the old Vedic science of *nirukta,* or word interpretation, the reading required to translate Avalokitasvara into *Kuan-shih-yin* does more than bend the rules. Relying on the notion that there is an etymological connection between *lok,* meaning "to look," and *loka,* meaning "world"—the idea being that for most people the world is the visible realm—some early translator apparently wondered why we can't have both meanings at the same time in the same word. Thus, while *Kuan-yin* is the expected translation of Avalokitasvara, *Kuan-shih-yin,* presto-chango, is two words in one, which is not out of keeping with the powers of this bodhisattva.

Despite Avalokiteshvara's stature in the Buddhist pantheon, we know nothing about his origins. The earliest surviving statues (all of which depict a male form) date back to the third and fourth centuries A.D., and his earliest recorded appearances are in Pure Land sutras, such as the *Longer Sukhavativyuha,* translated into Chinese in the latter part of the second century. Near the end of the *Lotus Sutra,* which was first translated into Chinese at the end of the third century, the Buddha says that simply hearing this bodhisattva's name will free devotees from suffering and that chanting the name or thinking about this bodhisattva will save them from affliction, no matter how dire. For the sound of this bodhisattva's name has the power to echo through the universe and to make visible all who hear it, recite it, or recollect it. And as Avalokitasvara becomes aware of them, they are graced by this bodhisattva's infinite compassion.

Given Avalokiteshvara's appearance in scriptures as early as the second century, we can be reasonably safe in assuming that he joined the spiritual pantheon of Mahayana Buddhism no later than the first century A. D. and probably earlier. His origin, however, remains a matter of speculation. His earliest mentioned residence was on the mythical island of Potalaka somewhere off the southern coast of India, which is where he was living when he was visited by Sudhana in the Gandavyuha chapter of the *Avatamsaka Sutra.*

But if Avalokiteshvara came from Southern India, he gained his greatest following in the Northwest, where Mahayana Buddhism is said to have taken root in the century before and after the beginning of the Christian Era. This may have also been the area where this bodhisattva acquired several of his most prominent characteristics, and perhaps his female persona. One such source might have been the Persian goddess Anahita (the Blameless or Untainted One), who is often depicted, like Avalokiteshvara, holding a vase that bestows the water of life. Anahita is also accompanied by a peacock with a tail of a thousand eyes, not unlike Avalokiteshvara's manifestation with a thousand arms and an eye in each hand. The earliest mention of this bodhisattva's female persona, however, does not occur until the fifth century in China. Still, the fact that a woman could be recognized as an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara at this date suggests that the association goes back much earlier, though perhaps not in written form. Thus, we will have to wait for

archaeological evidence to emerge from Central and South Asia before we can say anything more on this.

In addition to our ignorance concerning the origins of this bodhisattva, another question that has puzzled scholars is that Avalokiteshvara is invariably associated with Pure Land texts or with such millenarian scriptures as the *Lotus Sutra.* And this bodhisattva's chief attribute is compassion, not wisdom. So what is he doing delivering this heart of the Prajnaparamita, or Perfection of Wisdom? Some commentators have tried to explain this by suggesting that since wisdom is based on compassion, it is only fitting for Avalokiteshvara to serve as the medium through which we receive this summary. I find such an explanation unconvincing. He is nearly invisible in other Perfection of Wisdom texts, appearing only briefly in the *Perfection of Wisdom in Twenty-five Thousand Lines* and in the *Purna-prabhasa Samadhi-mati Sutra,* and then in the background. And nowhere else does Avalokiteshvara teach this teaching.

Because no one has offered anything approaching an answer to this anomaly, and because of the reasoning I have outlined in the introduction, I cannot help but conclude that Avalokiteshvara appears here as an incarnation of Maya, the Buddha's mother. Thus, Avalokiteshvara's name, meaning Lord of Those Who Look Down from On High, refers to her rebirth as the deva Santushita on the summit of Mount Sumeru, where she gained the perspective and the knowledge that enabled her to look down upon such conceptual systems as the Abhidharma. That she now appears as a male bodhisattva is in keeping with the early Buddhist notion that such rebirth was necessary for the cultivation and attainment of buddhahood. However, Avalokiteshvara alone among bodhisattvas was also known for the ability to appear as a female, which was, no doubt, related to his previous incarnation as Maya. Another point worth noting is that Avalokiteshvara is known to have thirty-three manifestations, the same number as the number of devas at the summit of Mount Sumeru.

Fa-tsang says, "This name is given to someone who has the power to see without being obstructed by concepts or objects and whose power to see how to aid those who hope to be rescued is also unobstructed. The first explains

his wisdom, the second his compassion."

Chih-shen says, "Avalokiteshvara sees existence but does not cling to existence and sees emptiness but is not attached to emptiness. Bodhisattvas can suck up the ocean in a strand of hair or put Mount Sumeru in a mustard seed. A mustard seed and a strand of hair represent the mind, while Mount Sumeru and the ocean represent the world. Whenever a bodhisattva thinks about Mount Sumeru or the ocean, they are in the bodhisattva's mind. Thus a mustard seed contains Mount Sumeru and a strand of hair the ocean. The reason this is so is because all dharmas come from the mind."

Chen-k'o says, "Beings have never ceased to be bodhisattvas. But because they don't understand that individuals and dharmas are empty, and they become trapped by suffering, we call them beings. Once a person's understanding is unobstructed, who isn't a bodhisattva? Kuan-tzu-tsai (Avalokiteshvara) is another name for Kuan-shih-yin (Avalokitasvara). Someone like Chef Ting (*Chuangtzu:* 2), who could butcher an ox with his knife as if nothing was there, is called an *ishvara.*"

Ching-chueh says, "As for *ishvara,* ordinary people are tied by dharmas to the pillars of the Five Skandhas and have no mastery over them. A bodhisattva sees within that the Four Elements and Five Skandhas are completely empty and becomes their master. Seng-chao says, 'The attributes of dharmas neither exist nor do not exist, thus there is nothing to point to outside. And the knowledge of sages neither exists nor does not exist, thus there is nothing to think about inside.' If one can be like this, one dwells in existence without existing, because one doesn't think about the existence of existence. And one dwells in emptiness without being empty, because one doesn't cling to the emptiness of emptiness. When the mind is pure and unmoving, and the world is pure and unchanging, when one communicates without words and is obstructed by nothing, one is called an *ishvara* bodhisattva."

Hui-ching says, "Seeing the emptiness of greed, he is master of generosity; seeing the emptiness of sin, he is master of morality; the same holds for the rest of the paramitas; and seeing the emptiness of ignorance, he is master of wisdom. Seeing the Hinayana Path as a provisional teaching, he is master of

the Four Truths; seeing the Middle Path as a sequential teaching, he is master of the Chain of Dependent Origination; and seeing the Mahayana Path as free of attachments, he is master of enlightenment and nirvana. Seeing form as empty, he is master of the eyes; seeing sound as empty, he is master of the ears; the same holds for the rest of the senses; and seeing the emptiness of dharmas, he is the master of the mind. Seeing the subject as empty, he is master of the interior; seeing the object as unreal, he is master of the exterior. Because he sees there is not a single dharma to be found, he is thus called a master. But any bodhisattva who is no longer bound by the twin dharmas of passion and nirvana is a master, not only Avalokiteshvara."

Yin-shun says, "This bodhisattva who has attained mastery over the insights of prajna does not necessarily refer to the bodhisattva of Potalaka Island (home of Avalokiteshvara). Whoever possesses the power of unobstructed reflection is worthy of being called Avalokiteshvara."

2. WHILE PRACTICING THE DEEP PRACTICE OF PRAJNAPARAMITA: *gambhiran prajna-paramita caryan caramano* 行深般若波羅蜜多時

The word *cara* here serves as both a verb and a direct object and means to practice the practice, to walk the walk. In early texts, the Buddha's disciples were distinguished as to whether they were still in training (*shaiksha*) or no longer in need of training (*ashaksha*), and the Buddha's teachings were referred to as a system of training (*shiksha*). Thus, Buddhism is better understood as a skill or an art to be practiced and perfected rather than as information or knowledge to be learned and amassed.

This practice is described here as *gambhira,* or "deep." The same adjective is also used in Sanskrit to describe the two bodily clefts of the navel and the vagina that link one life to another, and its use here recalls the Buddha's teaching to Subhuti in the *Diamond Sutra:* "From this is born the unexcelled, perfect enlightenment of tathagatas, arhans, and fully enlightened ones. From this are born buddhas and bhagavans" (8). Nothing could be deeper than the womb of Prajnaparamita, the Goddess of Transcendent Wisdom, with whom all buddhas are linked, belly to belly.

In the longer, later version of this sutra, this is also the name of the samadhi (union of subject and object in meditation) in which the Buddha remains while Avalokiteshvara speaks this sutra: *Gambhira Avabhasan* (Manifestation of the Deep). As noted, *gambhira* refers to such bodily clefts as the vagina and the navel, while *avabhasan* can mean "illumination" or "manifestation" and is probably derived from the same root as *avatara,* which refers to the "incarnation" of a deity. Thus, in a Tantric sadhana (ritual enactment) associated with the *Heart Sutra,* the Buddha's entry into this samadhi is also described as representing the Buddha's entry into the womb of Prajnaparamita (cf. Donald Lopez, *Elaborations on Emptiness,* pp. 131-140). Elsewhere, the Buddha is described as residing in the vaginas of deities that represent the heart of all buddhas (cf. S. Bagchi, ed., *The Guhyasamaja Tantra,*

p. 1). The reason a buddha enters this deepest of wombs is to show by example how to become a buddha.

While Prajnaparamita is sometimes personified as the goddess of the same name, more often this refers to the teaching that gave rise to Mahayana Buddhism. In its initial formulation in such scriptures as the *Ratnagunasancaya Gatha* and the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines,* this teaching focuses on the application of transcendent wisdom to the mundane understanding of the world as well as to the metaphysical understanding of the Abhidharma. This new approach, born of yogic insight rather than philosophical speculation, involved the dissolution of analytical categories without establishing any new ones to take their place. Thus, the teaching of Prajnaparamita could be characterized as Lao-tzu did the Tao, "The way that becomes a way / is not the Eternal Way / the name that becomes a name / is not the Eternal Name" (*Taoteching:* 1). Still, Lao-tzu proceeded to write eighty-one verses on what has no name.And the Buddha likewise spoke at great length on the Prajnaparamita.

This teaching developed quite naturally from the early Buddhist practice of the Three Skandhas, or Pillars: morality (*sila*), meditation (*dhyana*), and wisdom (*prajna*). With the introduction of the paramitas, or perfections, this threefold practice became sixfold: generosity (*dana*) now preceded morality, which was followed by forbearance (*kshanti*) and vigor (*virya*), after which came meditation and wisdom. According to some commentators, the first two paramitas of generosity and morality were the focus of lay practice and were intended to increase a person's *punya,* or merit, and the last two paramitas of meditation and wisdom were the focus of monastic practice and were intended to increase a person's *jnana,* or knowledge. The middle two paramitas of forbearance and vigor were the proper concern of all practitioners, lay and monastic, and were intended to increase a person's compassion and resolve.

Together, the paramitas represented a regimen of positive spiritual development, as opposed to earlier more proscriptive views of religious conduct, and a regimen that gave equal weight to lay practice. But what set the Six Paramitas apart from earlier conceptions of practice was their stress

on the central role played by wisdom and the non-attachment that arises from its practice. Concerning the first paramita of generosity, Bodhidharma once told his disciples, "Since what is real includes nothing worth begrudging, practitioners give their body, life, and property in charity, without regret, without the vanity of giver, gift, or recipient, and without bias or attachment. And to eliminate impurity, they teach others, but without becoming attached to form" (Red Pine trans., *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma,* p. 7). Thus, since the practice of the paramita of generosity is based on an insight as to what is real, early Mahayana practitioners focused on wisdom as the key that makes the other paramitas effective. Wisdom is often described as the center of a five-petalled flower from which the fruit of buddhahood grows. In the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines,* the Buddha tells Ananda, "The paramita of wisdom incorporates the other five paramitas by means of practices that are based on all-embracing knowledge. Thus does the paramita of wisdom include the other five paramitas. The 'paramita of wisdom' is simply a synonym for the fruition of all six paramitas" (80-82).

Taken together, the paramitas are also likened to a boat that takes us across the sea of suffering. The paramita of generosity, according to this analogy, is the wood, light enough to float but not so light that it floats away. Thus bodhisattvas practice giving and renunciation but not so much that they have nothing left with which to work. The paramita of morality is the keel, deep enough to hold the boat upright but not so deep that it drags the shoals or holds it back. Thus bodhisattvas observe precepts but not so many that they have no freedom of choice. The paramita of forbearance is the hull, wide enough to hold a deck but not so wide that it can't cut through waves. Thus bodhisattvas don't confront what opposes them but find the place of least resistance. The paramita of vigor is the mast, high enough to hold a sail but not so high that it tips the boat over. Thus bodhisattvas work hard but not so hard that they don't stop for tea. The paramita of meditation is the sail, flat enough to catch the wind of karma but not so flat that it holds no breeze or rips apart in a gale. Thus bodhisattvas still the mind but not so much that it withers and dies. And the paramita of wisdom is the helm, ingenious enough to give the boat direction but not so ingenious that it leads in circles. Thus bodhisattvas who practice the paramitas embark on the greatest of all

voyages to the far shore of liberation.

Fa-tsang says, "The practice of prajna is of two kinds: shallow prajna, whereby persons are seen to be empty, and deep prajna, whereby dharmas are seen to be empty. Here, to note the difference, it describes prajna as deep. *Prajna* is the substance and means 'wisdom,' which is the spiritual awakening to the subtlest mysteries and the wondrous realization of the true source. *Paramita* is the function and means 'to reach the other shore,' which is to use this marvelous wisdom to transform sansara until one reaches completely beyond it to the realm of true emptiness."

Ching-mai says, "When bodhisattvas practice the Prajnaparamita, they do not think 'I am practicing the Prajnaparamita, or not practicing the Prajnaparamita, or not not practicing the Prajnaparamita. If bodhisattvas can practice like this, they can benefit countless beings. But they do not think there is any benefit. And why not? Because bodhisattvas do not perceive anything inside dharmas or outside dharmas."

Chih-shen says, "To practice means to proceed according to the principle of suchness thought after thought without stopping for a moment."

Huai-shen says, "This is the Mahayana practice of deep wisdom, not the Hinayana practice of superficial wisdom. It includes all practices that are not practiced and not clung to that never stop helping other beings. It is like when a magician performs magic in order to make people aware of illusion. This is why it is called 'the deep practice of Prajnaparamita.'"

Hui-ching says, "When a person is asleep, they might dream they're in a boat, that they're crossing a river and reaching the other shore. Then they suddenly wake up at home, and the river and the person in the boat are gone. When bodhisattvas cultivate the Way, they understand that both people and dharmas are empty. And after approaching the end of the path and gaining the forbearance of birthlessness, they realize that the person who cultivates and the path they cultivate are nothing but a dream or illusion."

Deva says, "Prajnaparamita is the name of the dharma-kaya, the body that is neither born nor destroyed, that neither comes nor goes, that has the dimensions of emptiness, that is changeless, that fills the entire universe and

includes all things and yet fits inside a mustard seed or a mote of dust, and for which metaphors fail."

3. LOOKED UPON THE FIVE SKANDHAS: *vyaavalokayati sma panca skandhas* 照見五蘊

The verb *avaloka* means "to look (down) upon," and *vya* is an emphatic. Hence, the literal meaning of *vya-avaloka-yati* is "to look down upon intently." Thus, Avalokiteshvara practices the practice for which he was named, looking down from above, and perhaps thereby betrays an association with the hill gods of ancient India, if not with the deva Santushita at the summit of Mount Sumeru.

In the earliest texts that deal with meditation, practitioners are advised to begin by focusing their attention on four subjects (*catvari smirti-upasthanani*): form, sensations, mind, and finally dharmas, the constructs of the mind that such sects as the Sarvastivadins maintained were the underlying substance of reality. This fourfold scheme was probably an earlier variation of the Five Skandhas, which also began with form and sensation but which then divided mind into perception, memory, and consciousness. It didn't bother with dharmas, because they were subsumed under the various skandhas.

The reason Buddhists focused on the Four Smirti Upasthanas or the Five Skandhas is that they provide everything we need in our spiritual explorations. They are not only equivalent to what we normally think of as our selves; they are equivalent to the entire universe, as we experience it. They include all of creation. This is what Avalokiteshvara looks down upon. The Greek philosopher Archimedes once claimed he could move the world if he had a place to stand and a long enough lever. Avalokiteshvara has found such a place and such a lever.

The Western inquiry into reality generally follows the Cartesian dictum "I think, therefore I am." The Five Skandhas are an early example of the Buddhist solution to the same sort of self-reflection. But instead of taking the Archimedean standpoint vis-à-vis an external world, the Buddhist analysis never goes beyond our immediate experience. And as a result of reflecting on this experience, Buddhists conclude: "I am aware, therefore I neither am nor am not." Thus, by taking his stand on the emptiness of self-existence,

Avalokiteshvara uses the lever of prajna to move the world of the skandhas.

The Sanskrit word *skandha* refers to the trunk of a tree, and I think the trunk of a banyan, or *Ficus indica,* might have been what the Buddha had in mind when he started using this term. The banyan is one of the world's most unusual trees. It begins as an aerial root that descends from a seed dropped by a bird in the canopy of another tree, such as a palm. After the seed sprouts, its root descends until it reaches the ground, and once established, it strangles its host. As it continues to grow, its branches put forth their own aerial roots, and these, in turn, form additional trunks. In the course of a hundred years, the original trunk becomes impossible to distinguish among the grove of roots that develop into trunks. In Sri Lanka, there is a banyan that has more than 350 major trunks and 3,000 minor ones and that forms its own forest. Thus, the banyan is called "the tree that walks."

The Buddha frequently sought shelter within the wide, outstretched root structure of such trees. And we know from Vatsyayana's commentary on the aphorisms of Akshapada in the *Nyaya Sutras* (II: 1087) that from a distance a skandha was sometimes mistaken for a human being. Hence, it is not surprising that the Buddha chose a word like this to refer to this host-strangling-root that looks like a person. But instead of seeing the individual as a single skandha, the Buddha saw five skandhas, as he considered a person's experience of the world from five different perspectives. Whether this fivefold analysis originated with Shakyamuni or he learned about it from someone else is unknown. The Jains also used the word *skandha* for any whole object, including the individual. But the Buddha appears to have been alone in analyzing the individual and the individual's experience of reality from five points of view. The fact that he often had to explain what he meant by the Five Skandhas suggests they represented a form of analysis not widely known, even to the disciples of other teachers.

Before considering what the Five Skandhas include, I should note that translators have generally settled on "aggregate" as their preferred rendering of this term in English. Given the word's multiple meanings, such a translation is possible, though, I suggest, inappropriate in this context. For it emphasizes a derivative meaning that distorts the word's basic frame of

reference. This derivative meaning was the one chosen by Vasubandhu in his *Abhidharmakoshabhasaya,* and it has been used ever since by commentators cognizant of this classic work on the Abhidharma. However, *skandha* refers to a tree trunk or a pillar made from a tree trunk and not a pile of wood. I will not belabor the point and only hope future translators and commentators will continue to explore this issue.

In his use of the word *skandha,* the Buddha views the universe of our awareness as supported by these five trunks or pillars, or as consisting of these five aspects, which are separate in name only, and each of which exhausts everything of which we are aware from a different point of view. I have sometimes thought of them as overlays in an anatomy textbook: the skin, the musculature, the skeleton, the circulatory system, and the nervous system, to name only five. But this, of course, is only an analogy and should not be misconstrued as referring to an actual body or an individual self. Rather they represent a system of analysis designed to find our actual bodies or individual selves.

The first skandha in this analysis of our awareness is *rupa,* or form. *Rupa* is not the material world. It is simply the outside world, in contrast to what we presume is an inside world. Thus, the word *rupa* does not actually refer to a concrete object but to the appearance of an object. Form is like a mask that cannot be removed without revealing its own illusory identity. Such a mask might be worn by a table or a sunset or a number or a coin (the rupee), or a universe. Whether such things are real is not relevant. The important thing is that they make up a presumed outside to a presumed inside.

In the Buddha's system of analysis, the skandha of form includes not only appearances but also the means by which those appearances are apprehended. Thus, form is not an objective category but a subjective one extrapolated from a person's own experience and beyond which it has little, if any, meaning. In order to substantiate the existence of an external world, and thus to prove the existence of an inner one, a means is needed whereby that external world can be known. The Buddhist definition of form thus includes the powers of the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, and the skin as well as the domains in which they function: sight, sound, smell, taste, and feeling.

Hence rupa is not limited to what we normally think of as our body; it includes the sun and the wind and the bamboo outside the window and the window and whatever else we might find in and through the five senses.

To provide some members of his audience with a more accessible entrance into this universe of form, the Buddha further analyzed these powers and domains as representing different combinations of the Four Elements: earth (solidity), water (moisture), fire (heat), and wind (motion). These were already part of general discourse in the Buddha's day, and his inclusion of them was more like sugar-coating for the materialist members of his audience. But while the materialists of ancient India also included the element of space (*akasha*) in their five-element view of the universe, the Buddha omitted this as having no relevance for what was basically a phenomenological approach. Essentially, form is a conceptual category established in order to give meaning to mind. Form does not represent a separate reality outside of mind, merely a stage on which to proceed with the analysis.

Altogether, there are ten kinds of form, or fourteen, if the four elements are included as a subcategory. As noted, the ten include the five powers of sensation and their five respective domains. Several centuries after the Buddha's Nirvana, some Abhidharma schools, notably the Sarvastivadins, added an eleventh category for forms that were presumed to exist but whose existence could not be verified by the five senses. For the Sarvastivadins this category was primarily intended to allow the existence of past and future dharmas. However, it was not accepted by other schools, in particular the Darshtantikas. This category and the difference of opinion regarding its validity are worth noting because the position of the Darshtantikas, and later that of the Sautrantikas, was to treat all dharmas, including this eleventh kind of form, as so many ripples in the stream of consciousness and empty of any self-existence. This was in stark contrast to the Sarvastivadins, who held that all dharmas were essentially real. Thus, the teaching of the *Heart Sutra* did not simply fall out of the sky but more likely evolved out of such conflicts as this over the status of form (cf. "On the Possibility of a Nonexistent Object of Consciousness: Sarvastivadin and Darshtantika Theories" by Collett Cox in the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1988).

In any case, these various kinds of form were thought to account for our experience of an external world. Thus, with the backdrop of an outside established, the Buddha continued with an analysis of the inside, which he divided into four additional skandhas. These were apparently developed from the second half of an earlier bipartite division of reality into *nama-rupa.* According to this twofold scheme, *rupa,* or form, refers to the things we know, namely the outside world, while *nama,* or name, refers to the means by which we know the things we know, namely the inside world. From a Western perspective, this might be interpreted as a division into matter and mind, but it was more of a division into objective mind and subjective mind.

In turning his attention to *nama,* the Buddha began his analysis of "subjective mind" with sensation, or *vedana,* and made this the second skandha. The word *vedana* was derived from *vid,* meaning "to know" or "to experience," and was used by Buddhists to refer to our evaluation of form. Once one establishes the existence of form, sensation necessarily follows as the interface between *nama* and *rupa,* between inner mind and outer mind. Although to call it an interface does not mean it is separate. None of the skandhas are separate in any sense other than as analytical constructs. They merely represent different ways of looking at the same experience. The skandha of sensation looks at our experience as a process of evaluation. This is not the same as sensory input but rather the evaluation of input, which the Buddha rarely described in any more detail than positive, negative, or neutral. For the most part, our experiences are neutral and ignored. But certain experiences appear to satisfy a need or pose a danger and are classified accordingly. As we walk through a forest our eyes take in countless appearances, but we quickly focus on a snake or a wildflower or some object that might affect our continued existence. Thus, Buddhists do not understand sensation as the passive collection of data from an outside world but as the active sorting and grading of appearances and their transformation into objects according to categories supplied by the third skandha.

The third skandha is perception, or *sanjna.* Like sensation, perception was also included as a subcategory of the earlier concept of *nama.* The word *sanjna* is derived from *san* (together) and *jna* (to know) and refers to our experience as a kaleidoscope of conceptual combinations. Without the skandha of

perception, our sensations cannot be classified as positive, negative, or neutral. Perception supplies the framework that allows us to make such judgments as well as the framework that allows us to objectify or subjectify our experience. It also supplies the means that allow us to manipulate our sensations, so that we see what we want to see and don't see what we don't want to see. Thus, sensation is dependent not only on the skandha of form but also on the skandha of perception. And likewise, the skandha of perception is dependent on sensation as well as the fourth skandha, which is the source of its seemingly never-ending supply of conceptual constructs.

The fourth skandha is *sanskara,* which I have translated as "memory," and which replaced both volition (*cetana*) and attention (*manasikara*) as subcategories of *nama.* The word *sanskara* is derived from a combination of *san* (together) and *kri* (to make). Thus, it means "put together" and refers to those things we have "put together" that have a direct bearing on the way we think or perceive. In the past this term has often been translated as "impulse," "volition," "predisposition," or "mental conformation." But each of these renderings involves certain limitations and distortions. For example, "volition" suggests a separate will tantamount to a self, and "impulse" implies the lack of any will or self. "Predisposition" comes closer but does not necessarily establish a connection with past actions. And such invented terms as "mental conformation" are simply too bizarre to have much use outside academic circles, very small academic circles. What this term basically refers to is our karmic genome, the repository of all that we have previously intended, whether expressed in the form of words, deeds, or thoughts. Thus, *sanskara* embraces all the ways we have dealt with what we have experienced in the past and that are available to us as ways to deal with what we find in the present. Among the meanings for *sanskara* listed by Monier-Williams is "the faculty of memory, mental impression or recollection, impression on the mind of acts done in a former state of existence ... the reproductive imagination...a mental conformation or creation of the mind (such as that of the external world, regarded by it as real, though actually non-existent" (*Sanskrit-English Dictionary,* p. 1120).

Under the skandha of *sanskara,* the Sarvastivadins listed fifty-two kinds of habitual behavior patterns, such as intelligence, belief, shame, confidence,

indolence, pride, anger, envy, sloth, repentance, doubt, anything that might provide us with a prefabricated set of guidelines from the past with which to perceive and deal with the world, both inside and outside, as we experience it in the present. Thus, the skandha of memory supplies the templates that perception applies to sensations and form.

And how do we know this? Because we are conscious of it. Thus, the fifth and final skandha is consciousness (*vijnana*). The *vi* in *vijnana* means "to divide." Thus, just as *san-jna* emphasizes knowledge that results from combination, *vi-jnana* emphasizes knowledge that results from separation, separation of subject from object and one object from another. Hence, *vijnana* is often translated as "discrimination." In terms of the skandhas, *vijnana* refers to the faculty of the mind in general, the ability to be aware, aware of anything, but always something—form, sensations, perceptions, memories, and, of course, a "self." It is the least discussed of the skandhas because to discuss it would be like the hand trying to grab. Essentially, consciousness refers to our ability to establish the states that memory recapitulates. Although as a skandha it is rarely analyzed beyond its discriminative function, as a dhatu it is further distinguished according to which power and domain of sensation gives rise to it (cf p. 105).

But if we stop to consider these five pillars that support our awareness, it becomes clear that the *Heart Sutra* presents them to us backward in order to make them easier to grasp for those whose understanding of reality begins with the material world. In terms of the world as we actually experience it, we begin with the skandha of consciousness and then extrapolate the memory of previous states of consciousness from which we then extrapolate perceptions from which we extrapolate sensations from which we extrapolate an objectified world of form.

Basically the skandhas represent an attempt to exhaust the possible paths we might take in our search for a self, for something permanent or pure or separate in the undifferentiated flux of experience. They are five ways of considering our world and looking for something we can call our own. This is why Avalokiteshvara looks upon the Five Skandhas. The Five Skandhas are the limit of reality. If we are going to find anything real, this is where we are

going to find it. But no matter how often or how long or how intently we search through the skandhas, we come up empty-handed. Thus, the skandha of form is often compared to foam, because it cannot be grasped; the skandha of sensation to a bubble, because it lasts but an instant; the skandha of perception to a mirage, because it only appears to exist;the skandha of memory to a banana tree, because it has no core; and the skandha of consciousness to an illusion, because it is a well-concealed deception. And yet the skandhas are not separate from what is real.

In the *Samyukt Agama,* the Buddha asks the ascetic Shrenika Vatsagotra if the Tathagata (another name for a buddha) is the same as the skandhas, and Shrenika says, "No, Bhagavan." Again the Buddha asks if the Tathagata is separate from the skandhas, and again Shrenika answers, "No, Bhagavan." The Buddha then asks if the Tathagata is inside the skandhas. Again Shrenika answers, "No, Bhagavan." The Buddha then asks if the skandhas are inside the Tathagata. Once more Shrenika says, "No, Bhagavan." Finally the Buddha asks if the Tathagata is not the skandhas, to which Shrenika answers, "No, Bhagavan" (105). Likewise, in the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines,* the Buddha says that enlightenment is neither inside the skandhas nor outside them, nor both inside and outside them, nor other than the skandhas (I: 9).

When the early Sarvastivadin Abhidharma masters laid out their matrices of reality, they listed all but three of their seventy-five dharmas under these five categories. Only space and two kinds of nirvana were considered outside their reach. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that the skandhas include everything we think of as real, and not just our physical body. They include five possible bodies, each of which is limited in extent only by our awareness and our willingness and ability to differentiate.

Chen-k'o says, "The Five Skandhas are the root of the ten-thousand forms of suffering and the basis of the thousand calamities. Because beings don't yet realize they are empty, they are entangled and ensnared by them."

Ching-chueh says, "The *Madhyamaka-karika* says, 'What I call "me" is the combination of the Five Skandhas, not something that is fixed. It is like when we put posts and beams together to make a house. If we take away the posts

and beams, there is no house.' Also, inside a house that has been dark for a thousand years, a person doesn't realize there are jewels or sense the presence of demons and thieves. But once a lamp is lit, the darkness vanishes, and everything becomes clear. Thus, precious stones appear when the water is clear, and the moon shines bright when the clouds part."

Conze says, "The first step towards wisdom consists in getting the *skandhas* into view. This requires considerable knowledge, practice and skill, but it is the indispensable basis for all that follows" (*Buddhist Wisdom Books,* p. 79).

4. AND SEEING THEY WERE EMPTY OF SELF-EXISTENCE: *tansh ca svabhava shunyan pashyati sma*

皆空(度一切苦厄)

The verb here is *pashyati,* which means "to see." In the Buddha's day, a person who saw what others did not see was called a *pashyaka,* or seer. Avalokiteshvara's seeing is deep seeing. It is like seeing into the structure of the universe, but even deeper.

Applying a similar perspective in the search for our selves, George Leonard asks, "Of what is the body made? It is made of emptiness and rhythm. At the ultimate heart of the body, at the heart of the world, there is no solidity ... there is only the dance" (*The Silent Pulse,* p. 34). This, however, is still the "seeing" of physics, which is limited by its focus on the "physical" world. Avalokiteshvara's perspective is incomparably wider and deeper, for it takes in the world of mind as well as matter. Still, he, too, sees the emptiness of the elements into which early Buddhists divided reality. This was not a new discovery on Avalokiteshvara's part. It was part of the Buddha's earliest teaching. But what was new, at least as far as the Sarvastivadins were concerned, was that these elements were not simply declared to be empty but to be empty of *sva-bhava* or "self-existence."

This "self " (*sva*) whose existence (*bhava*) was maintained by some Buddhists was more generalized in its application than "ego" (*atman*) and referred not only to beings but to any inherent substance that could be identified as existing in time or space as a permanent or independent entity. Thus, the term *sva-bhava* is somewhat redundant, implying a "self-existing existence." From the point of view of Mahayana Buddhism, this is the greatest of all delusions, the belief that something exists. Upon close analysis, nothing exists by itself. Any given entity can only be defined in terms of other entities in time, space, or mind. And these in turn can only be defined in terms of other entities, and so on *ad infinitum.* Thus, nothing exists by itself, and

nothing exists as itself. There is no such thing as a self.

Here, Avalokiteshvara looks at the skandhas and sees that they are empty, or *shunya.* The Sanskrit word *shunya* means "hollow," "void," or "zero." What is hollow, void, or zero is the existence of a self. But if there is no self-existence, there is also no non-existence. According to Mahayana Buddhism, this is the second greatest of all delusions, the belief that nothing exists. Emptiness does not mean nothingness. It simply means the absence of the erroneous distinctions that divide one entity from another, one being from another being, one thought from another thought. Emptiness is not nothing, it's everything, everything at once. This is what Avalokiteshvara sees.

After this line, the Chinese translations of Kumarajiva, Hsuan-tsang, and Yi-ching interpolate the line "and was healed from all suffering" (*tu yi-ch'ieh k'u-o*). Most likely they noted the occurrence of this phrase near the end of the sutra in line 33 and decided a second occurrence near the beginning would help emphasize the point that emptiness is not nothingness but what liberates us from suffering. No other Chinese translation, however, follows suit. Nor has any Sanskrit copy been found that contains this line.

Conze says, "Etymologically, *shunya* (empty) conveys the idea that something, which looks like something much, is really nothing. From outside there appears to be a lot, but there is really nothing behind. A 'swelled' head, as we know, is an 'empty' head" (*Buddhist Wisdom Books,* p. 80).

Fa-tsang says, "Although the absolute and provisional are both submerged, their two truths are permanently present. Although emptiness and existence are both denied, their one meaning shines forever. True emptiness has never not existed, but by means of existence it is distinguished from emptiness. Illusory existence has been empty from time without beginning, but by means of emptiness it is seen as existing. Because existence is an empty existence, it does not exist. And because emptiness is an existent emptiness, it is not empty. Emptiness which is not empty, does not stop being empty. And existence which does not exist, exists but not forever."

Chen-k'o says, "This line is the heart of this sutra. Ordinary people are deluded and don't realize this body is a temporary combination of the Four Elements and consider it real. Thus, they hear about life and are pleased. They

hear about death and are distressed. They don't have any idea that by viewing this body as the Four Elements, they can't find anyone who is born or dies. If the body is like this, then so is the mind. Its delusions, reasonings, and shadows are nothing but a combination of the four other skandhas. But by viewing the mind as the four skandhas, they also can't find anyone who suffers."

Hui-ching says, "If the skandhas exist, then suffering isn't empty. But once someone understands that the skandhas are empty, what does suffering have to rest on? For example, when the wind blows against water, it creates bubbles. As long as they're bubbles, they aren't water. But when bubbles disperse and become water, they aren't bubbles. Bubbles represent beings, and water represents our buddha nature."

Lao-tzu says, "The reason we have suffering / is because we have a body / if we didn't have a body / we wouldn't have suffering" (13).

5. SAID, "HERE, SHARIPUTRA: *iha shariputra* 舍利子

The emphatic *iha* (here) is often omitted by translators but is one of the most important words in the sutra. *Iha* is the Zen master's shout, the poke in the ribs, the cup of tea. This was the basis of the fifth point of contention at Buddhism's Third Council, held in 267 B.C., or one hundred and sixteen years after the Buddha's Nirvana. This council was convened by King Ashoka in Pataliputra (modern Patna), and is said to have concerned itself with five issues raised by the monk Mahadeva. The first four concerned the status of the *arhan,* the hero of the shravaka tradition: Was an arhan still subject to sexual desire, was an arhan still subject to ignorance, was an arhan still subject to doubt, and was an arhan still subject to further instruction? The fifth issue was whether a person could become enlightened by an exclamation or sudden sound. As the questions raised by Mahadeva were all answered in the affirmative, this essentially lowered the status of the arhan and opened up the possibility of enlightenment outside the confines of monastic practice. Thus, this council is often seen (by the Mahayana) as marking the beginning of the split into the Hinayana and Mahayana traditions.

Thus, with "here" Avalokiteshvara opens the door to the Great Path of the Mahayana. Right here, right now, in the light of Prajnaparamita, he looks at the skandhas that the Sarvastivadins considered real and sees the absence of anything permanent, anything pure, anything separate, anything complete unto itself.And he conveys this realization to the disciple of the Buddha best known for his analysis of the self-existence of the skandhas. Thus, Avalokiteshvara gives the skandhas a name, the name Shariputra.

Unlike Avalokiteshvara, we know a great deal about Shariputra. In ancient India, children often received two names, one from each parent. Thus, Shariputra was sometimes referred to as *Upa-tishya,* "child of Tishya," after his father, who was a Brahman priest. But more often he was called *Shariputra,* "son of Shari," after his mother, whose eyes were said to resemble those of the *shari,* or Indian myna (*Gracula religiosa*). As a child Shariputra was

expected to follow in his father's footsteps, and as a youth he was known for his knowledge of Brahman scriptures and his skill in debating points of doctrine, which he often did with his boyhood friend, Maudgalyayana. *Maudgaly-ayana,* the "offspring of Maudgali," the "crow," was also named for his mother, and these two sons of bird-eyed women lived in the neighboring villages of Nalaka and Kolita. Their two families had been linked with one another for seven generations, and both boys were not only born on the same day, they were also conceived on the same day.

As young men Shariputra and Maudgalyayana often traveled together to Rajgir, the nearby capital of the kingdom of Magadha, to attend important festivals. During one such occasion, they both came to the realization that their lives of pleasure were doomed to end, and they vowed to attain deliverance from such transient existence. After exchanging their white robes for rags, the two friends sought out Sanjaya, the leader of a group of sophists. They were at first attracted by his arguments, but the two men soon exhausted the depths of Sanjaya's teachings. And when they realized they had nothing more to learn from him, they wandered off in search of someone else who could teach them how to escape the sufferings of this life and the next. After visiting teachers throughout Northern India without success, they finally found themselves back in Rajgir and decided to part company for a while. But first they made a pact that whichever of them found the path to liberation would tell the other.

Not long afterward, Shariputra decided to revisit his old teacher, Sanjaya. And on his way there, he saw Ashvajit making his morning rounds begging in the city. Ashvajit was Shakyamuni's cousin and also one of his first five disciples. Impressed with Ashvajit's demeanor, Shariputra asked him who his teacher was and what teaching he followed. Ashvajit replied that Shakyamuni was his teacher. As for what teaching he followed, he would only say, "Of what arises from causes / the Buddha shows how it begins / and also how it ceases / thus does the Great Recluse instruct." This subsequently became one of the most widely quoted summaries of the Buddha's teaching in India, and upon hearing it, Shariputra realized the first of the four stages of attainment known as "reaching the river," the river of impermanence.

Shariputra was so overwhelmed, he went at once to find his friend Maudgalyayana, who also experienced the same level of realization upon hearing the same verse. Both men then decided to become disciples of the Buddha, but Shariputra suggested they first tell their former teacher and ask him to join them. Sanjaya, however, was unwilling to become the disciple of another man. And so Shariputra and Maudgalyayana left to find the Buddha, taking with them five hundred of Sanjaya's disciples.

When the Buddha saw the two men and their entourage approaching, he told his disciples that these two would become his two chief disciples. He ordained them and within a week Maudgalyayana had reached the fourth and final stage of an arhan, or one who is free of passion and destined for no further rebirth.After another week, Shariputra also reached the birthless state. It was said it took him a week longer because he thought through the Buddha's teachings in greater detail. Thus, during the Buddha's lifetime, Maudgalyayana was ranked first among the Buddha's disciples in terms of spiritual powers, and Shariputra was ranked first in terms of wisdom. In statues or paintings, Shariputra always stands on the Buddha's right, and Maudgalyayana on the Buddha's left. During the Buddha's ministry, Shariputra was also his chief assistant and occasionally took his place in preaching the Dharma.

After forty-some years of wandering with his teacher across the floodplain of the Ganges, Shariputra finally returned home to teach his mother. But while he was there, he became ill and died. This was in the spring of 383 B.C., six months before the Buddha entered Nirvana. In 1851, Shariputra's relics, along with those of his friend Maudgalyayana, were discovered in a stupa excavated by Alexander Cunningham at Sanchi, near Bhopal in Central India. In Chapter Three of the *Lotus Sutra,* the Buddha predicted Shariputra would forsake the goal of nirvana and turn instead to the bodhisattva path and eventually become the buddha Padmaprabha. With this in mind, the *Heart Sutra* can be read as his first step in his new career.

Chih-hsu says, "If you want to know how to get down the mountain, you need to ask someone coming up. Thus, we are given the example of someone who has successfully examined their mind."

6. FORM IS EMPTINESS, EMPTINESS IS FORM: *rupan shunyata shunyataiva rupan* 色即是空，空即是色

Buddhist commentators distinguish five kinds of emptiness: the emptiness of pre-existence, the emptiness of post-existence, the emptiness of non-existence, the emptiness of mutual exclusion, and the emptiness of self-existence. Avalokiteshvara is referring to this last form of emptiness.

There are many ways of viewing this statement. From a purely historical point of view, the first part was aimed at the Sarvastivadins, who believed such dharmas as form were self-existent, and the second part was aimed at the Sautrantikas, who believed that the skandha of consciousness was self-existent. Having seen that all five skandhas are empty of anything self-existent, Avalokiteshvara turns from the Hinayana interpretation of emptiness, which holds that there is some aspect of certain dharmas that persists over time, to that of the Mahayana.

That form is empty was one of the Buddha's earliest and most frequent pronouncements. But in the light of Prajnaparamita, form is not simply empty, it is so completely empty, it is emptiness itself, which turns out to be the same as form itself.

The logic of this, which has become the most famous statement in Mahayana Buddhism, goes like this: Form, or any other entity of the mind, is defined by the mind and exists only because we claim it exists. The only thing that exists, in this case, is our definition of form. Form itself is empty of anything that could be called self-existent. Whatever we use to define form, it is dependent on something else. Thus, the essential nature of form is emptiness. But emptiness is simply another name for reality—not just a part of reality, for reality has no parts, but all of reality—though neither can reality be considered to be a whole. The essential nature of reality is that it is indivisible, or empty of anything self-existent. But if form is equivalent to emptiness, or the indivisible fabric of reality, then emptiness must also be

equivalent to form. Thus, Avalokiteshvara goes beyond the understanding of early Buddhists, who understood that form is empty, and surprises Shariputra with the statement "emptiness is form." Avalokiteshvara turns Shariputra's understanding of the Abhidharma upside-down and tells him that in the light of wisdom the seamless fabric of reality is equivalent to any attempt to separate reality into parts, including parts, such as form, that themselves are attempts to account for all of reality, as we experience it. The absence of anything self-existent is the true nature of all that we experience, however distorted that experience might be by the matrix of our minds. But it is also the true nature of reality.

This, then, is the hub around which this sutra turns, the equation that puts an end to the dualistic conception of reality. The problem that arises when we reflect on our experience is that we reflect on our experience. We think, therefore we are. And once we are, we are in trouble, forever divided by what we use to define our existence. In analyzing the elements of this particular definition of self-existence, namely the Five Skandhas, Avalokiteshvara sees that they are empty of anything permanent, pure, or inherent; they are empty of anything real. They are empty as a group, and they are empty individually. They are so completely empty, we might be tempted to say that they do not exist. But we can't say that they do not exist, because they exist as delusions. And we can't say they do not not exist, because they are completely empty. Thus, as used by Avalokiteshvara, and by Mahayana Buddhists in general, the word "emptiness" does not mean nothingness. It is a double negative that stops short of establishing a positive. Emptiness means indivisibility.

Something that is empty of self-existence is inseparable from everything else, including emptiness. All separations are delusions. But if each of the skandhas is one with emptiness, and emptiness is one with each of the skandhas, then everything occupies the same indivisible space, which is emptiness, and the same indivisible time, which is also emptiness, and the same indivisible mind, which is emptiness again. Everything is empty, and empty is everything. Avalokiteshvara denies all views regarding the skandhas that would regard any of them as real by telling us that "form is emptiness." But he also denies all views that would regard any of them as annihilated by

telling us that "emptiness is form." Neither do the skandhas exist, nor do they not exist. What we are left with is a koan: "form is emptiness and emptiness is form."

Ching-chueh says, "According to the *Perfection of Wisdom in Twenty-five Thousand Lines,* 'Form is emptiness. Form does not annihilate emptiness.' Hence, those who realize the Way do not use emptiness to perceive form, for they know that form essentially is not form. Nor do they use form to perceive emptiness, for they know that essentially emptiness is not emptiness."

Pao-t'ung says, "Form and emptiness are the same. From the buddhas above down to the smallest insect below, every creature is basically empty. This form cannot be seen by the eyes. Only true emptiness can see it. And this form cannot be heard by the ears. Only true emptiness can hear it. The myriad things we know and feel all depend on our six senses. But form and emptiness are not separate."

Chen-k'o says, "In the distance, form includes the Great Void, heaven and earth, mountains and rivers and forests. Nearby, it includes this body of flesh and blood that appears before us. Regardless of whether it's large or small, if it can be perceived, it's called 'form.'"

Ming-k'uang says, "Form and the mind are not two different dharmas. And how so? The mind is not inside or outside or somewhere in between. It extends everywhere. It's like space."

Hui-ching says, "Followers of lesser paths use emptiness to eliminate form, unaware that emptiness is their own mind. But if the mind sees emptiness, then emptiness becomes an object and an obstruction. And an obstruction is another name for 'form.' But bodhisattvas understand the nature of form is simply emptiness, not form cancels emptiness, and not formlessness is emptiness, and not emptiness depends on insight, and not emptiness is due to no mind, and not emptiness means cutting off dharmas."

Yin-shun says, "Most people don't understand this. They think that 'emptiness' means 'nothing' and that it can't produce everything that exists. They don't realize that if dharmas weren't empty, no dharmas would ever appear, that what exists would always exist and what doesn't exist would

never exist. But dharmas aren't like that. Those that exist can change, then they don't exist. And those that don't exist can appear to exist as the result of causes and conditions. The birth and destruction, the existence and non-existence of dharmas is entirely dependent on their lack of self-existence and their fundamental emptiness. Thus, Nagarjuna said, 'Because of emptiness, all things are possible. '"

Conze says, "The infinitely Far-away is not only near, but it is infinitely near. It is nowhere, and nowhere it is not. This is the mystical identity of opposites. Nirvana is the same as the world. It is not only 'in' and 'with you,' but you are nothing but it" (*Buddhist Wisdom Books*, p. 83).

7. EMPTINESS IS NOT SEPARATE FROM FORM, FORM IS NOT SEPARATE FROM EMPTINESS: *rupan na prithak shunyata sunyataya na prithag rupan*

色不異空，空不異色

In considering this relationship, Avalokiteshvara realizes that it only works because form and emptiness are inseparable. Thus, he advances their equation by eliminating the possibility that form and emptiness overlap but do not completely coincide. Not only are they identical, they are not different. Although two entities might be the same under certain conditions, it is still possible that under other conditions they differ. This statement eliminates that possibility. There are no conditions under which form is different from emptiness or emptiness is different from form. Emptiness and form are closer than inseparable; they are essentially indistinguishable. Thus, because of its relationship with emptiness, form is neither permanent nor impermanent. Form cannot be permanent because it is emptiness. And form cannot be impermanent because it is emptiness. The same holds for form and suffering or form and the presence of a self.

Chen-k'o says, "As for seeing that the Five Skandhas are empty, this is not an emptiness separate from the skandhas but the emptiness of the skandhas. The emptiness realized by Avalokiteshvara is not the one-sided emptiness of the Lesser Path and not an emptiness of senselessness or an emptiness of annihilation. It is simply the emptiness that is form. Since form can be emptiness, emptiness can be form. Thus, it says 'form is not separate from emptiness and emptiness is not separate from form.'"

Hui-chung says, "People misapprehend their own mind and see form as something outside their mind. They don't know that form exists because of their mind. And where could form come from, if not from their mind? Thus, it says, 'Form is not separate from emptiness.' People turn their backs on their mind and grab hold of dharmas and think emptiness is something outside

their mind. They don't know that emptiness arises from their mind. All they need to do is awaken to their own mind. There is no emptiness to find. Emptiness and form are not separate. Thus, it says, 'emptiness is not separate from form.'"

Chih-shen says, "Inside emptiness there is no form. Outside form there is no emptiness. Emptiness and form are one suchness. Thus they are not separate."

Ching-chueh says, "According to Nagarjuna, 'Form illuminates emptiness. Without form there is no emptiness. And emptiness illuminates form. Without emptiness there is no form. Emptiness and form share the same nature.' Hence, they are said to be "not separate." This is the teaching of the One Path."

Te-ch'ing says, "The statement 'form is not separate from emptiness' destroys the ordinary person's view of permanence. This is because ordinary people think that only their material body is real. And because they consider it permanent, they make hundred-year plans and don't realize their body is an empty fiction and subject to the ceaseless changes of birth, old age, illness, and death. But even when it reaches old age and death and finally becomes impermanent and turns out to be empty, this is still the emptiness of origination and cessation and not yet the final truth. Consequently, the illusory forms of the Four Elements are basically no different from true emptiness. But ordinary people don't know this. Thus, it says, 'form is not separate from emptiness.' This means that the physical body is basically not different from true emptiness.

"As for the statement 'emptiness is not separate from form,' this statement destroys the view of annihilation held by followers of the Lesser Path and members of other sects. Although members of other sects cultivate, they remain unaware that their body comes from karma and karma comes from the mind, and they go around life after life without stop. And because they don't understand the principle of retribution that occurs from one lifetime to the next due to cause and effect, they think that after someone dies, their pure breath returns to heaven and their coarse breath returns to earth, and their true spirit returns to the Great Void. But if their essence returns to the

Great Void, then there would be no retribution, and doing good would be useless, and doing evil would have its advantage. And if their essence returns to the Great Void, all their good and evil deeds would leave no traces, which would amount to nihilism. Would that not be unfortunate?

"Although followers of the Lesser Path use the teachings of the Buddha in their practice, because they don't understand that the world is nothing but mind and the myriad dharmas are nothing but ideas, they don't realize that life and death are illusions, and they think the forms of the Three Realms really exist. Thus, they regard the world as a prison and birth as shackles. They don't give rise to the thought of saving others but sink into emptiness and quietude and drown in the stillness of nirvana. Thus it says, 'emptiness is not separate from form.' The true emptiness of prajna is like a huge round mirror, and every illusory form is like an image in the mirror. Once you know that images don't exist apart from the mirror, you know 'emptiness is not separate from form.'"

8. WHATEVER IS FORM IS EMPTINESS, WHATEVER IS EMPTINESS IS FORM: *yad rupan sa shunyata ya shunyata tad rupan* 是色彼空，是空彼色

This completes the comparison of form and emptiness and carries their mutual identification to its logical conclusion by allowing for variations in our definitions of form or emptiness. Regardless of how we might conceive of form or emptiness, they are identical. In viewing such conceptual categories as form, Avalokiteshvara sees that they can only be established in terms of emptiness. All other terms, such as those that would discriminate an individual entity as permanent, unique, or real, turn out to be inadequate to the task. And emptiness can only be established in terms of categories that are *a priori* empty. Whatever we might consider emptiness to be, it is identical to whatever conceptual category we might dream up, in this case the skandha of form.

The existence of form is not denied, nor its non-existence. It exists as a category of analysis. But every analysis involves the use of terms that are essentially the same. For example, in mathematics, if we are actually able to write the perfect formula and establish the coefficient of *x* and *y* as 1, that is, if any given movement on the *x* axis is reflected by an equal movement on the *y* axis, not only are they equal, their original differentiation as *x* and *y* must be a mistake. Thus, however we define form or emptiness, they are one and the same in all times and in all places and under all conditions.

Fa-tsang says, "Before they enter nirvana, followers of lesser paths see the skandhas as devoid of a self and dharmas as empty. They look on the emptiness of the skandhas as referring to the absence of a self in the skandhas and not to the skandhas themselves being empty. Thus, for them, the skandhas are different from emptiness. But now they are told that the self-existence of the skandhas is essentially empty, which is not the same. Thus, it says 'form is not separate from emptiness' and so on. Also, according to their understanding of what happens after they enter nirvana, the body and

Pakistan.