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THE  
Heart *of*  
Understanding

COMMENTARIES *on*  
*the* PRAJNAPARAMITA  
HEART SUTRA

Thich Nhat Hanh  
AUTHOR OF *Being Peace*



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EDITED BY Peter Levitt



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## FOREWORD ~

**T**he Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra is the essence of Buddhist teaching. It is chanted or recited daily in monastic and lay communities throughout the world. Thich Nhat Hanh's commentaries, contained in this book, are part of the continuous stream of oral transmission basic to Buddhism since the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, 2,500 years ago. The literature of the Prajñāparamita (Perfect Understanding) dates back to the beginning of the Christian Era and has been studied and expounded for 2,000 years, first in India, and then in China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea, Tibet, and other countries with a Mahayana Buddhist tradition.

For nearly a century, these teachings have been available in English, and for more than fifty years they have been taught in the West in the context of meditation practice by Zen and Tibetan teachers. Often, these teachings have proven difficult for Westerners to understand.

In the spring of 1987, Vietnamese Zen master, poet, and activist for peace Thich Nhat Hanh offered a series of retreats and lectures in California, the Pacific Northwest, Colorado, New England, and New York. He encouraged his American listeners to join him in an experiment to discover what he called "the true face of American Buddhism," one that is not foreign but springs from the depths of our

understanding. “Buddhism is not one. The teachings of Buddhism are many. When Buddhism enters a country, that country always acquires a new form of Buddhism. . . . The teaching of Buddhism in this country will be different from other countries. Buddhism, in order to be Buddhism, must be suitable, appropriate to the psychology and the culture of the society that it serves.” To enrich our understanding and aid us in our explorations, Thay (an informal title for “teacher,” pronounced “tie”) offered several talks on the Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra. Some of these were public lectures delivered to seven or eight hundred listeners, and others were offered to fifty or sixty people on retreat together.

At the retreat in Ojai, California, artists and meditators sat beneath a large oak in the cradle of the Los Padres Mountains, the sound of early morning birds or the touch of a warm breeze accompanying Thay’s gentle, penetrating voice. His talks on the Heart Sutra were singularly comprehensible, bringing new life and vivid understanding to this ancient teaching. This book is a compilation of several of those talks, several streams flowing together to form one.

During the retreats, Thay encouraged participants to give calm, clear-seeing, and intimate attention to each daily activity, whether eating a meal, drawing a Buddha, or just walking quietly, aware of the contact between our foot and the earth that supports it. In order to encourage this kind of mindfulness, a bell master sounded a large bell regularly, and

everyone stopped their activity, breathed three times, and recited silently, “Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true self.”

“A bell is a bodhisattva,” Thay said. “It helps us to wake up.” With this in mind, when the bell was invited to sound we put down our garden tools, our hammers, our paint brushes or pens, and came back to ourselves for a moment, breathing with a natural serenity, smiling a relaxed smile to ourselves and all those around us—the people, the trees, a flower, a child running with delight, even our worries and sometimes our pain. As we did this, we just listened deeply and became one with the sound of the bell. It is truly remarkable how deeply a bell can ring inside a person. After this pause, we resumed our activity with renewed energy, a little more attentively, a little more aware.

A bell is not the only kind of bodhisattva. Anything can help us to awaken to the present moment and all that it contains. “Buddhism is a clever way to enjoy life,” Thay says. In this light, I would like to suggest you read this small book as if listening to a bell. Put down your daily tasks for a moment, both physical and mental, sit comfortably, and allow the words of this wonderful teacher to ring deeply inside you. I am certain, if you bring yourself and this book together in this way, you will hear the bell of mindfulness many times. When it rings, lower the book and listen to its sound echoing in your own depths. You might even try breathing calmly and offering a smile. This may seem difficult at first, as it did for many of us, but I can still hear



Thay's encouraging voice tell us, "You can do it!" In this way, the depth of your heart and of the Heart Sutra will come very close. They might even touch.

Intimacy is at the heart of the teaching contained in this book. In the thirteenth century, Zen Master Eihei Dogen taught that enlightenment is just intimacy with all things. Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching is the same. When we allow the true heart of understanding to arise within us, such intimacy is not only possible, it is the spontaneous expression of what we and all things truly are. To allow our lives to be guided by such intimacy is to nourish the seed of compassion within us and others alike. Peace between partners, neighbors, nations—even peace within ourselves—may sometimes seem an impossible dream, but if we look deeply into the heart of the teaching Thich Nhat Hanh offers, I think we can discover a way for such peace to be realized. Peace in our world is not far from there.

Peter Levitt  
Salt Spring Island  
British Columbia  
June 2009

# THE HEART OF PERFECT UNDERSTANDING

The Bodhisattva Avalokita,  
while moving in the deep course of Perfect Understanding,  
shed light on the Five Skandhas and found them equally empty.  
After this penetration, he overcame ill-being.

“Listen, Shariputra,  
form is emptiness, and emptiness is form.  
Form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form.  
The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and  
consciousness.

“Listen, Shariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness.  
They are neither produced nor destroyed,  
neither defiled nor immaculate,  
neither increasing nor decreasing.  
Therefore, in emptiness there is neither form, nor feelings, nor  
perceptions,  
nor mental formations, nor consciousness.  
No eye, or ear, or nose, or tongue, or body, or mind.  
No form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind.  
No realms of elements (from eyes to mind-consciousness),  
no interdependent origins and no extinction of them  
(from ignorance to death and decay).

No ill-being, no cause of ill-being, no end of ill-being, and  
no path.

No understanding and no attainment.

“Because there is no attainment,  
the Bodhisattvas, grounded in Perfect Understanding,  
find no obstacles for their minds.  
Having no obstacles, they overcome fear,  
liberating themselves forever from illusion, realizing perfect  
Nirvana.

All Buddhas in the past, present, and future,  
thanks to this Perfect Understanding,  
arrive at full, right, and universal Enlightenment.

“Therefore, one should know  
that Perfect Understanding is the highest mantra, the  
unequaled mantra,  
the destroyer of ill-being, the incorruptible truth.  
A mantra of Prajñāparamita should therefore be proclaimed:  
*Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.*”\*

\*Gone, gone, gone all the way over, everyone gone to the other  
shore, enlightenment, hurrah!

## INTERBEING ~

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*. “Interbeing” is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix “inter-” with the verb “to be,” we have a new verb, *inter-be*.

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine *inter-are*. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger’s father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a

sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here in this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything coexists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word *inter-be* should be in the dictionary. To be is to *inter-be*. You cannot just *be* by yourself alone. You have to *inter-be* with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.

Suppose we try to return one of the elements to its source. Suppose we return the sunshine to the sun. Do you think that this sheet of paper would be possible? No, without sunshine nothing can be. And if we return the logger to his mother, then we have no sheet of paper either. The fact is that this sheet of paper is made up only of “non-paper elements.” And if we return these non-paper elements to their sources, then there can be no paper at all. Without non-paper elements, like mind, logger, sunshine, and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.

But the Heart Sutra seems to say the opposite. Avalokiteshvara tells us that things are empty. Let us look more closely.

Avalokita looked deeply into the five skandhas of form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, and he discovered that none of them can be by itself alone. Each can only inter-be with all the others. So he tells us that form is empty. Form is empty of a separate self, but it is full of everything in the cosmos. The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

## THE WAY OF UNDERSTANDING ~

*After this penetration, he overcame ill-being.*

**P**enetration means to enter something, not just to stand outside of it. When we want to understand something, we cannot just stand outside and observe it. We have to enter deeply into it and be one with it in order to really understand. If we want to understand a person, we have to feel their feelings, suffer their sufferings, and enjoy their joy. The sutra uses the word “penetration” to mean “full comprehension.” The word “comprehend” is made up of the Latin roots *com*, which means “together in mind,” and *prehendere*, which means “to grasp it or pick it up.” So to comprehend something means to pick it up and be one with it. There is no other way to understand something.

If we only look at the sheet of paper as an observer, standing outside, we cannot understand it completely. We have to penetrate it. We have to *be* a cloud, *be* the sunshine, and *be* the logger. If we can enter it and be everything that is in it, our understanding of the sheet of paper will be perfect.

There is an Indian story about a grain of salt that wanted to know just how salty the ocean was, so it jumped in and became one with the water of the ocean. In this way, the grain of salt gained perfect understanding.