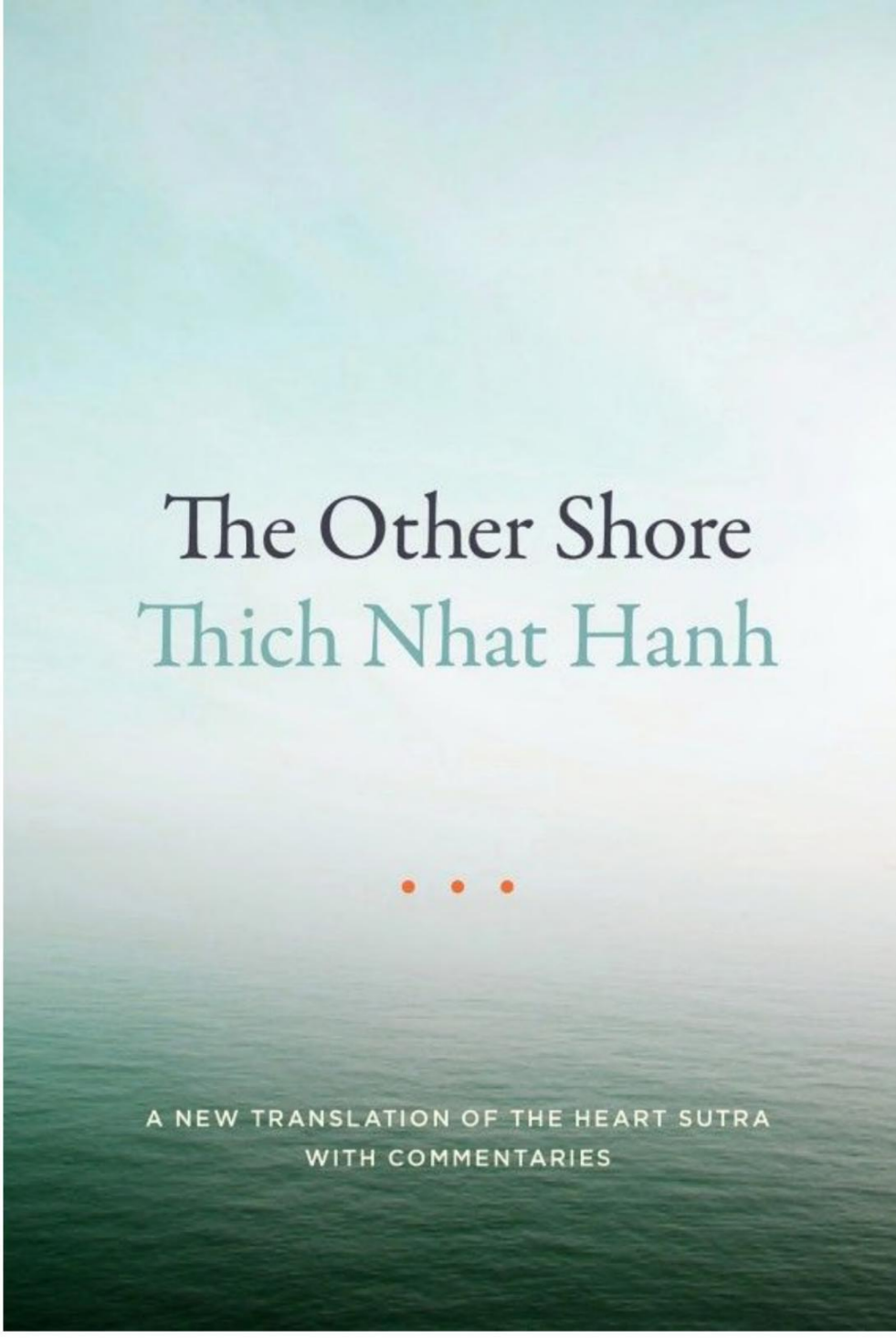

Published by Palm Leaves Press, an imprint of Parallax Press

Parallax Press
P.O. Box 7355
Berkeley, California 94707
parallax.org

Parallax Press is the publishing division of Unified Buddhist Church, Inc.

Cover and text design by Debbie Berne
Author photo © U.B.C.

Ebook ISBN 9781941529157

Names: Nhât Hanh, Thich, translator. | Laity, Annabel, writer of foreword.
Title: The other shore : a new translation of the Heart sutra with commentaries / Thich Nhat Hanh.
Other titles: Tripitaka. Sutrapitaka. Prajnåpåramitå. Hrdaya. | Tripitaka. Sutrapitaka. Prajnåpåramitå. Hrdaya. English.
Description: Berkeley, California : Parallax Press, 2017.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017004532 (print) | LCCN 2017027257 (ebook) | ISBN 9781941529157 | ISBN 9781941529140 (paperback)
Subjects: LCSH: Tripitaka. Sutrapitaka. Prajnåapåramitå. Hrdaya–Commentaries. | BISAC: PHILOSOPHY / Zen. | RELIGION / Buddhism / Zen (see also PHILOSOPHY / Zen). | RELIGION / Buddhism / Sacred Writings.
Classification: LCC BQ1967 (ebook) | LCC BQ1967 .N485 2017 (print) | DDC 294.3/85–dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017004532

v4.1
a

contents

foreword to the first edition

The Prajñāpāramitā 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 Śākyamuni Buddha, 2,500 years ago. The literature of the Prajñāpāramitā (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 Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition.

For nearly a century, the Prajñāpāramitā 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 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 Prajñāpāramitā 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.

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 sort of half 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, perhaps a little more attentively, a little more aware.

It is not only a bell that can be a 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 a way to read this book so you may join with the clear heart of understanding it conveys. Please read it just like 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 Dōgen 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 ourselves 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 book which you hold in your hands includes one of the most well-known texts in Buddhism, the Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya Sūtra, commonly referred to as the Heart Sutra. This sutra encompasses the essential teachings that can bring us to a place of nonfear and nonviolence. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Zen teacher of the Plum Village tradition, has offered commentary and teachings on this sutra several times. The first teachings were given in 1998 and form part of this book. The most recent teachings were given in 2014, some months before Thay, as his students call him, suffered a stroke. Those teachings are also in this book. In the Appendix you will find a Sanskrit version of the Heart Sutra, which has been chanted for around 1500 years in Sanskrit and Chinese, along with a word-for-word English translation.* The sutra has been translated from these two languages into hundreds of modern languages. From the 1980s until 2014, the monastics in the Plum Village tradition chanted and studied a translation of the Sutra based on these Sanskrit and Chinese originals which can be found here.

In August 2014, Thich Nhat Hanh revised the traditional wording of the Heart Sutra to clarify the meaning of "emptiness" so that the Heart Sutra cannot be misunderstood as a teaching of nihilism. Emptiness does not mean nothingness. Emptiness means that something is empty of a separate self. The traditional wording of the Heart Sutra can be misleading. Thay titled his translation of the Heart Sutra as "The Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore." It carries within it and expresses very clearly the essence of the teachings of the Prajñāpāramitā on interbeing, no-self, the Middle Way, emptiness, signlessness, and aimlessness.

Sr. Chân Đúc
Plum Village, 2016

* The version of the Heart Sutra used in this book was probably written between the fifth and sixth centuries CE, and certainly before the seventh century CE. An early Chinese text of the Heart Sutra under discussion here is Xuanzang's Chinese translation from c. 649 CE. It remains unknown who compiled the sutra (and whether it was by one or many authors) and whether it originates from India or China.

author's preface

The Cloud and the Cave

In the mountains of Vietnam, there are caves where many thousands of birds make their nests. In the early morning, the birds fly out to look for food to bring back for their young. Sometimes the mouth of the cave is obscured by a passing cloud and the birds cannot find their way home. Only when the bright light of the sun melts away the clouds can the birds see clearly the entrance to the cave and come home.

In our lives there are things that seem to block our way, causing confusion and preventing us from finding our true home. Not only obstacles and suffering cause us to lose our way; sometimes the most profound teachings can mislead us if we do not understand them correctly. Even a sutra can block our way to liberation if we do not know how to handle it skillfully. The Heart Sutra is a deep and important text, which has the capacity to bring us to the shore of liberation, happiness, and peace, and yet it has also caused much misunderstanding for more than 1,500 years. I believe that these misunderstandings have come about because the patriarch who compiled the Heart Sutra made an unskillful choice of wording.

We know that words can be misleading, and that the deepest insights into the nature of reality are beyond the reach of language, and yet, out of compassion, teachers over many generations have done their best to make skillful use of words to guide us on the path leading to liberation. When a teacher uses words, he or she knows that they are only an approximation —they cannot perfectly express the reality of awakened understanding. A good teacher knows that no matter how careful they are, some people will inevitably become confused, and yet they must still try their best to help guide their students out of suffering.

I have retranslated the Heart Sutra, and present it here in this book, along with a detailed commentary, in the hope that the wording in this version is clearer than that of the traditional text. To explain my approach, I would like to share with you two stories: the story of a novice monk who paid a visit to a Zen master[*1] and the story of a monk who brought a question to the Eminent Master Tuệ Trung, a renowned poet and lay Zen master who had once served as the mentor of the young King Trần Nhân Tông in thirteenth century Vietnam.

The Novice Monk and His Nose

The Zen master asked the novice monk: "Tell me about your understanding of the Heart Sutra."

The novice joined his palms and replied: "I have understood that all the five *skandhas* are empty. There are no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, and no mind. There are no forms, no sounds, no smells, no taste, no touch and no objects of mind. The eighteen realms of phenomena do not exist; the twelve links of interdependent arising do not exist; and insight and attainment also do not exist."

"Do you believe this?"

"Yes, I truly believe this."

"Come closer," the Zen master instructed the novice monk. As the novice drew near, the Zen Master reached out, grabbed his nose, and twisted it hard.

In great pain, the novice cried out, "Master! You're hurting me!"

The Zen master raised his eyebrows questioningly: "But you just said that the nose doesn't exist. So if there is no nose, then what's hurting?"

• • • • •

The essence of the Heart Sutra is contained in the well-known phrase: "Form is emptiness and emptiness is form." But the traditional Heart Sutra continues with the line: "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." How strange! First, the sutra states that form is emptiness and emptiness is form, but then it seems to contradict itself, saying that there is *no* form,

only emptiness, and that there is *no* body, there are *no* feelings, *no* perceptions, and so on. This is confusing and could lead to many harmful misunderstandings. We might be inclined to mistakenly think that nothing really exists, and that everything is only emptiness—seeing emptiness as a kind of nihilism. We can fall into this trap if we fail to understand the Heart Sutra correctly. As long as we keep this traditional wording, novices still risk getting their noses twisted.

In Buddhism, nihilism is considered an extreme view which can bring about suffering. When we encounter polarities, or pairs of opposites, we have the tendency to believe that one must be right and the other wrong. For example, we think that either *everything* exists, everything is real, or *nothing* exists, nothing is real. These are the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism. Either we believe that we have an eternal soul which will live on forever or we believe that we are just a meaningless collection of atoms and that when we die, we will be extinguished forever and nothing will be left. But the Buddha teaches us to avoid both these extremes of being and nonbeing. If we are wise, the Heart Sutra can help us to find the middle way between these extremes.

Now let us continue with the second story.

Do you have a Body?

One day a *bhikṣu*, a fully ordained monk, paid a visit to The Eminent Master Tuệ Trung and questioned him about the Heart Sutra:

"Respected Eminent Master, what does the phrase 'form is emptiness, emptiness is form' really mean?"

At first the Eminent Master remained silent. Then, after a while, he asked: "Bhikṣu, do you have a body?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then why do you say that the body is emptiness?" The Eminent Master then pointed to an empty part of the room, and asked, "Do you see a body in that empty space over there?"

"No, I do not."

"Then why do you say that emptiness is the body?"

The bhikṣu stood up, bowed, and went on his way. But the Master summoned him back in order to recite to him the following verse:

Form is emptiness, emptiness is form
is a skillful means created temporarily
by the Buddhas of the three times.
Emptiness is not form, form is not emptiness—
their nature is always pure and illuminating,
neither caught in being nor in nonbeing.

• • • • •

In this story, the Eminent Master Tuê Trung contradicts the Heart Sutra and challenges the sacred formula, "form is emptiness and emptiness is form," considered inviolable in the Prajñāpāramitā literature.

I believe that the Eminent Master went too far. The monk's difficulty wasn't caused by the phrase "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," but rather by the unskillful wording of the line: "Therefore in emptiness there is no form, no feelings, no perceptions, no mental formations, and no consciousness…"

The words of the traditional Heart Sutra are perfect from the very beginning, right up to the line: "no birth, no death, no defilement, no purity, no increasing, no decreasing." It is regrettable that the patriarch who compiled the Heart Sutra, did not add the four words "no being, no nonbeing" immediately after "no birth, no death." This would have helped us transcend the notions of being and nonbeing, and avoid being caught in ideas such as "no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue…"

There is a very practical verse by Shenxiu, a senior student of Daman Hongren, the Fifth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism in China:

Our body is a bodhi tree.
Our mind is a clear mirror.
We have to clean the mirror every day
so the dust will not have a chance to gather.

The Sixth Patriarch Huineng wrote a famous response to this verse. His response, though, is also caught in the notions of being and nonbeing:

There has never been a Bodhi tree,

nor a bright mirror.
Since ancient time,
nothing has ever really existed
so where can the dust settle?

Just as a passing cloud can obscure the mouth of a cave and prevent the birds from finding their way home, so the traditional wording of the Heart Sutra has obscured its true meaning, leading to countless misunderstandings concerning the existence or nonexistence of phenomena, and causing many generations to lose their way.

A New Heart Sutra

The deepest of the Prajñāpāramitā teachings are the emptiness of self (*adhyātmaśūnyatā*) and the emptiness of all phenomena (*sarva-dharmaśūnyatā*), and not the *nonexistence* or *nonbeing* of self and phenomena.[*2] That is why in this new translation I have chosen a different formulation of words than is found in either the various Sanskrit versions, or the Chinese version by Xuanzang. Instead of saying "That is why in emptiness, there is neither form, nor feelings, nor perceptions, nor mental formations, nor consciousness," I have formulated the line as follows: "That is why in emptiness, body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness *are not separate self-entities*."

All phenomena are products of interdependent co-arising; they do not have a separate self. This is the key point of the Prajñāpāramitā teaching. They cannot exist on their own; they have to inter-exist. And so it is more helpful to use the phrase "not separate self-entities." Even insight and attainment are not separate self-entities. This new formulation, "not separate self-entities," is as important as the formula "form is emptiness and emptiness is form."

This rewording is needed because to say "in emptiness there is no form, no feelings, no mental formations, no consciousness…" is not in accord with the ultimate truth. Emptiness means only the *emptiness* of self, not the *nonbeing* of self, just as when a balloon is empty inside it doesn't mean that the balloon doesn't exist. We are empty of a separate self, but you can't say we have no nose. Of course we have a nose; of

course we have a body; of course we are there. The same is true with saying that "all phenomena bear the mark of emptiness": this line asserts the *emptiness* of all phenomena, not the *nonexistence* of phenomena. It is like a flower, which is made only of non-flower elements. The flower is empty of a separate existence, but that doesn't mean that the flower is not there.

The insight of Prajñāpāramitā is the ultimate truth, transcending all conventional truths. It is the highest insight of Buddhism. Any passage in the Buddhist canon—even in the impressive Prajñāpāramitā literature—which does not reflect the spirit of this insight, still lies within the realm of the relative, conventional truth and cannot be said to reflect the ultimate truth.

The insight of Prajñāpāramitā helps us transcend all pairs of opposites such as birth and death, being and nonbeing, defilement and purity, increasing and decreasing, subject and object, and helps us to get in touch with the true nature of no birth and no death, no being and no nonbeing—the true nature of all phenomena. This is a state of coolness, peace, and nonfear that can be experienced in this very life, with this body and with our five skandhas. It is nirvāṇa. *Just as the birds enjoy the sky, and the deer enjoy the meadow, so do the wise enjoy dwelling in nirvāṇa*. This is a very beautiful sentence from the Nirvāṇa Chapter of the Chinese Dharmapada.

The teaching on no being, no nonbeing always goes along with the teaching on no birth, no death. For this reason I have added "no being, no nonbeing" to the series of negations in the text. The Buddha's deep teaching of no being, no nonbeing is recorded in the Kātyāyana Sutra, when the Buddha gave a definition of right view. These four words, "no being, no nonbeing" will help future generations not to suffer a twisted nose.

The Heart Sutra appeared late in the period of the flowering of Mahāyāna literature, perhaps as late as the fifth or sixth century CE.[*3] Around the same time, Tantrism was gathering strength, and practitioners of the Tantric schools were beginning to rely more on magic, introducing many mantras and mudrās to help them attain enlightenment.[*4] The patriarch who compiled the Heart Sutra wanted to employ a skillful means to encourage followers of Tantric Buddhism to practice and recite

the Heart Sutra—which contains the deepest teachings of Buddhism—so that's why he presented the Heart Sutra as a kind of mantra.

A New Title for the Heart Sutra

What we commonly refer to as the "Heart Sutra" is a shortened translation of the Sanskrit title *Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtram*. *Pāram* means "the other shore," *ita* means "gone", and *prajñā* is "insight." *Hṛdaya* means "heart" or "essence," and a *sūtra* is a scripture. For this new translation I have used the phrase, *The Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore*, because in the final mantra there is also the expression *pāragate*, which means "having gone to the other shore." In the Sutta Nipāta, one of the earliest Buddhist texts, composed centuries before the Heart Sutra, there is already a chapter called Pārāyana, which means "crossing over to the other shore."

I hope you enjoy practicing and chanting this new version of the Heart Sutra in English. On the twenty-first of August in 2014, at around three in the morning, just after I finished the translation, a moon ray penetrated my room.

[*1] Throughout this book we use the word *Zen*, now a common word in English, for the Chinese character 禪, which is the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit term *dhyāna*, meaning "meditation," pronounced *chán* in Chinese, *sŏn* in Korean, *zen* in Japanese, and *thiền* in Vietnamese.

[*2] The Heart Sutra may have been composed to help the followers of the Sarvāstivāda school of Buddhism, which was flourishing at the time, to relinquish the view that "there is no self, but phenomena really exist." See more in Chapter 5: "The Mark of Emptiness."

[*3] Although scholars have not yet been able to come to a clear consensus on exactly when or where the Heart Sutra was written, it is considered to be a condensation of an important body of texts in Sanskrit collectively known as the Prajñāpāramitā literature. This began most likely with the the Prajñāpāramitā in 8,000 Verses, and the Store of Precious Virtues Discourse (Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā), composed between the first century BCE and the first century CE, and continued with the Prajñāpāramitā in 25,000 verses and 100,000 verses. The Vajracchedika or Diamond Sutra, was already compiled as a condensed, more accessible text for study and practice, between the second and fourth centuries CE, and before the 100,000 verse version. The Heart Sutra came later, and is even more condensed than the Diamond Sutra.

[*4] The Mantrayāna School existed from around the fourth century CE, and was eventually systematized as the Vajrayāna School after 750.

The Heart Sutra
The Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore

NEW TRANSLATION BY
THICH NHAT HANH, AUGUST 2014

Avalokiteśvara,
while practicing deeply with
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore,
suddenly discovered that
all of the five Skandhas are equally empty,
and with this realization
he overcame all Ill-being.

"Listen Śāriputra,
this Body itself is Emptiness
and Emptiness itself is this Body.
This Body is not other than Emptiness
and Emptiness is not other than this Body.
The same is true of Feelings,
Perceptions, Mental Formations,
and Consciousness.

"Listen Śāriputra,
all phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness:
their true nature is the nature of
no Birth no Death,
no Being no Nonbeing,
no Defilement no Purity,
no Increasing no Decreasing.

"That is why in Emptiness,
Body, Feelings, Perceptions,
Mental Formations, and Consciousness
are not separate self-entities.

"The Eighteen Realms of Phenomena,
which are the six Sense Organs,
the six Sense Objects,
and the six Consciousnesses,
are also not separate self-entities.
The Twelve Links of Interdependent Arising
and their Extinction
are also not separate self-entities.

"Ill-being, the Causes of Ill-being,
the End of Ill-being, the Path,
insight, and attainment
are also not separate self-entities.

"Whoever can see this
no longer needs anything to attain.

"Bodhisattvas who practice
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore
see no more obstacles in their mind,
and because there
are no more obstacles in their mind,
they can overcome all fear,
destroy all wrong perceptions,
and realize Perfect Nirvāṇa.

"All Buddhas in the past, present, and future,
by practicing
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore,
are all capable of attaining

Authentic and Perfect Enlightenment.

"Therefore Śāriputra,
it should be known that
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore
is a Great Mantra,
the most illuminating mantra,
the highest mantra,
a mantra beyond compare,
the True Wisdom that has the power
to put an end to all kinds of suffering.

"Therefore let us proclaim a mantra to praise
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore.

Gate, gate, pāragate, pārasaṃgate, bodhi svāhā!"

one

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 can 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*.

The word interbeing was born while I was leading a retreat at Tassajara Zen Center in the mountains of California in the 1980s. I was teaching about emptiness and I did not have a sheet of paper with me to illustrate the point, so I used an empty wooden chair. I invited everyone to look carefully into the chair to see the presence of the forest, the sunshine, the rain, and the clouds. I explained that the chair was not subject to birth and death, nor could it be described in terms of being or nonbeing. I asked them whether there was a word in French or English that could describe how the chair existed along with all the other non-chair elements. I asked if the word "togetherness" would do. Somebody said that it sounded strange, so I suggested the word "interbeing."

The insight of interbeing can help us understand the Heart of the Prajñāpāramitā Sutra more easily and the teachings on emptiness more clearly. Interbeing takes us beyond the dualistic notions of being and nonbeing, and helps us not to be afraid of nonbeing.

When people hear the word "emptiness," they often panic because they tend to equate emptiness with nothingness, nonbeing, and nonexistence. Western philosophy is preoccupied with questions of being and nonbeing,

but Buddhism goes beyond the dualistic notions of being and nonbeing. I often say, "To be or not to be, that is *no longer* the question. The question is one of interbeing."

If we continue to look into the sheet of paper, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. Without the sunshine, nothing can grow, not even us. So we know that the sunshine is also in the sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. Looking more deeply, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. We also see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread. So the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. The logger's father and mother are in the paper as well. Without all of these other things, there would be no sheet of paper at all.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are also in the paper. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper becomes the object of our perception. It is becoming more and more clear to neuroscientists that we cannot exactly speak of an objective world outside of our perceptions, nor can we speak of a wholly subjective world in which things exist only in our mind. Everything—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat, and even consciousness—is in that sheet of paper. Everything coexists with it. 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. If we returned the sunshine to the sun, would the sheet of paper still be possible? No, without sunshine the tree cannot be. If we returned the logger to his mother, then we wouldn't have a sheet of paper either. Looking in this way, we see that the sheet of paper is made entirely of "non-paper elements" and if we were to return any one of these non-paper elements to their source, there would be no paper at all. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe. So the one contains the all. But the Heart Sutra seems to say the opposite. In it, Avalokiteśvara tells us that things are empty. Let us look more closely to see why.

two

Empty of What?

Avalokiteśvara, while practicing deeply with
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore,
suddenly discovered that all of the five Skandhas are equally
empty and with this realization he overcame all ill-being.

Avalokiteśvara is the name of the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion; the one who knows how to listen deeply to relieve the suffering of living beings. *Avalokita* means "looking deeply," and *īśvara* means "master."* Together they mean the one who has mastered him or herself through the practice of looking deeply into the heart of reality, attaining the greatest possible freedom. *Bodhi* means "being awake," and *sattva* means "a living being," so *bodhisattva* means an awakened being. All of us are sometimes bodhisattvas and sometimes not. Avalokiteśvara is neither male nor female, sometimes appearing as a man and sometimes as a woman. In China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, Avalokiteśvara is known as Guanyin, Quan Am, or Kannon, respectively. Thanks to Avalokiteśvara's capacity to look and listen deeply, he can understand his own suffering, and from this deep understanding arises great compassion. Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva has transcended all fear through a profound understanding of the nature of reality. In the Heart Sutra, he reveals this profound understanding, *Prajñāpāramitā*, to Śāriputra, traditionally the foremost disciple of the Buddha in teaching the Dharma.

Prajñā means insight or understanding. *Pāramitā* means going or gone to the other shore. So *Prajñāpāramitā* is the insight that brings us to the other shore. Insight is not the same as knowledge. Understanding and insight, like water, can flow and can penetrate. Views, and the knowledge

we cling to, are solid and can block the flow of our understanding. In Buddhism, knowledge is regarded as an obstacle for true understanding. We have to be able to let go of our previous knowledge in the same way we climb up a ladder. If we are on the fifth rung and think that we are already at the top, there is no hope for us to step up to the sixth. We must learn to transcend our own views in order to progress on our path.

According to Avalokiteśvara, this sheet of paper is empty; but according to our analysis, it is full of everything. There seems to be a contradiction. Avalokiteśvara found the five skandhas—our form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness—to be empty. But empty of what? To be empty is always to be empty of *something*.

If I am holding a cup of water and I ask you, "Is this cup empty?" you will say, "No, it is full of water." But if I pour out the water and ask you again, you may say, "Now it is empty." But empty of what? Empty means empty of something. The cup cannot be empty of nothing. "Empty" doesn't mean anything unless you know "empty of what?" The cup is empty of water, but it is not empty of air. So to be empty is to be *empty of something*. This is quite a discovery. Therefore, when Avalokiteśvara claims that the five skandhas are equally empty, we must ask, "Dear Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, empty of what?"

The five skandhas, which may be translated into English as five heaps or aggregates, are the five elements that comprise a human being. These five elements are like five rivers, constantly flowing: the river of form, which means our body; feelings; perceptions; mental formations; and consciousness. They are always flowing. So Avalokiteśvara, looking deeply into the nature of these five rivers, suddenly saw that all five are empty. "Empty of what?" we ask. And this was the reply: "They are empty of *a separate self*."

The King and the Musician

There is a story of a king who, upon listening to a musician playing a sixteen-string sitar, was moved to the depths of his soul. The music touched him so deeply that he wanted to discover exactly where it was coming from. When the musician departed, he left his sitar with the king, and the king ordered his servant to chop the instrument into small pieces.

No matter how hard they tried, they could not find the source of the beautiful sound, the essence of the music. Just like the king looking into the sitar, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara looked deeply into his own five skandhas and discovered that they were empty of a self. No matter how wonderful something is, when we look deeply into it, we see that there is nothing in it we can identify as a separate self.

We have the tendency to believe that within the five skandhas there is something constant and unchanging, even though the five skandhas are continually flowing, being born, growing, fading away, and dying. Our feelings arise, stay for a while and then change or pass away. Our anger may flare up, but after a while it fades and disappears. Our body ages and grows old. Yet we cling to the wrong perception that everything is constant and unchanging. We continue to believe that our five skandhas do not change, that they have a self-nature, and that we are a separate self. The Buddha is always telling us that such a self is not there. If you break up the five skandhas, like the king did to the sitar, and try to find a self inside them, you won't succeed. There is no soul, no "I," no person inside the five skandhas. When we see that the five skandhas do not have a core substance or self, all suffering, distress, and fear disappear right away.

To say that our five skandhas—our body, our feelings, our perceptions, our mental formations, and our consciousness—are empty of a separate self is also to say that none of these five rivers can exist by itself alone. Each of the five rivers has to be made by the other four. It has to coexist; it has to inter-be with all the others.

In our bodies we have lungs, heart, kidneys, stomach, and blood. None of these can exist independently. They can only coexist with each other. Your lungs and your blood are two things, but neither can exist separately. The lungs take in air and enrich the blood, and, in turn, the blood nourishes the lungs. Without the blood, the lungs cannot be alive, and without the lungs, the blood cannot be cleansed. Lungs and blood inter-are. The same is true with kidneys and blood, kidneys and stomach, lungs and heart, blood and heart, and so on.

Full of the Cosmos

When Avalokiteśvara says that our sheet of paper is empty, the

bodhisattva means it is empty of a separate independent existence. It cannot just be by itself. It has to inter-be with the sunshine, the cloud, the forest, the logger, the mind, and everything else. It is empty of a separate self. But empty of a separate self means full of everything. So our observation and that of Avalokiteśvara do not contradict each other after all.

Avalokiteśvara looked deeply into the five skandhas and discovered that none of them can be by itself alone. Each can only inter-be with all the others. So our body is empty of a separate self but full of everything in the cosmos. Our feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness are all empty of their own separate nature and at the same time full of everything that exists.

---

* *Avalokiteśvara* evolved out of the earlier attested *Avalokitasvara*, "the one who hears the cries of the world"; the first Chinese translations of the name reflect this early meaning. Xuanzang later translated Avalokiteśvara as: "the master who looks deeply."

three

The Way of Understanding

And with this realization
he overcame all Ill-being.

When we want to understand something, we cannot just stand outside and observe it. We have to enter deeply into it and become one with it in order to really understand. If we want to understand a person, we have to feel their feelings, suffer their suffering, and rejoice in their joy. The sutra uses the word "realization" to mean "full or perfect comprehension." The word "comprehend" is made up of the Latin roots *com*, which means "together," and *prehendere*, which means "to grasp or pick 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 ancient 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.

If we want peace and we want to understand another country, we can't just stand outside and observe. We have to be one with the citizens of that country in order to understand their feelings, perceptions, and mental formations. Any meaningful work for peace must follow this practice: to go in and be one with, in order to really understand.

In the Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, the Buddha recommended that we observe in a penetrating way. He said we should contemplate the body *in* the body, the feelings *in* the feelings, the mental formations *in* the mental formations, phenomena *in* phenomena. He used this kind of repetition because you have to enter and become one with what you want to observe and understand. Nuclear scientists are beginning to say this also. When you enter the world of elementary particles you have to become a participant in order to understand something. You can no longer stand on the outside and remain just an observer. Today many scientists prefer the word "participant" to the word "observer."

We need to use this same practice to understand other people. If you want to understand your beloved, you have to put yourself in their skin, otherwise you won't be able to truly understand them. Without understanding, true love is impossible.

Overcoming Suffering

With understanding and realization comes relief. The ill-being we experience can be transformed by our insight into the nature of emptiness. Studying the Heart Sutra intellectually, as philosophy, will not have any effect on the suffering that we carry inside us. But if we are able to read every word and phrase of the Heart Sutra in the light of our suffering and our deepest aspirations, it will become meaningful. If we know how to apply our understanding of emptiness to our daily life and the many challenges and difficulties we encounter, we will be able to overcome our suffering and experience relief and happiness. This understanding will have the power to liberate us.

Avalokiteśvara was a human being just like us, and suffered just as we do. This is why the bodhisattva undertook the practice of looking deeply and, by doing so, discovered the nature of emptiness. Once Avalokiteśvara had this deep insight into the nature of emptiness, suffering ceased to manifest. With such a deep realization, we will, like Avalokiteśvara, not only be able to transform our own suffering and touch peace, freedom, and happiness, but also help others to do the same.