

Episode 208: Opening the Heart Sutra

The Heart Sutra draws us into a scenario: at Vulture Peak Mountain, in northern India, we encounter a great gathering of monks and nuns, lay people, and a community of bodhisattvas, whose minds are poised to awaken through their commitment to serve all living beings. There are others in attendance too: both seen and unseen, who join the assembly in a state of heightened anticipation to receive teachings from the Buddha.

Curiously, the Buddha sits in silence throughout most of the sutra. He exudes the energy of wakefulness and compassion, described in the sutra as “profound illumination.” There is not a single atom of his body or moment of his awareness that is not imbued with living, breathing wisdom. His silence suggests that wakefulness cannot be captured in words; and that the true nature of all things bursts from the seams of our ideas.

Within the Buddha’s profound silence, the venerable monk, Shariputra, boldly asks a question:

“How should a son or daughter of noble family train, who wishes to practice the profound Prajnaparamita?”

It is through Shariputra’s question that the entire teaching unfolds.

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Welcome to Open Question: A Call to Inner Brilliance. I’m Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel, and this is OQ 208: Opening the Heart Sutra.

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Buddhists throughout the world cherish the Heart Sutra. Monastics and lay people alike recite its profound message in their respective languages, with rhythmic melodies, drums and symbols. With reverence we enter into an experience of *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom*; in Sanskrit, the *Prajnaparamita*.

The Sanskrit term *sutra* means “thread” and is etymologically linked to the English word “suture.” A sutra is a collection of sounds and syllables that, like strands of thread, are woven or sewn together into a spiritual discourse. The Buddha’s use of the word “heart” refers to essence—the very nature of reality.

Many chant the Heart Sutra out of pure devotion. But know that it contains a concise message: its highest purpose is to remind us who we truly are; to point out the magnificence of the world we move about in, and to give us the vital information we need to navigate the beauty and pain of life with compassion and grace.

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“How should a son or daughter of noble family train, who wishes to practice the profound Prajnaparamita?”

Shariputra’s question ignites a compassionate response from the bodhisattva *Avaloketesvara*, whose Sanskrit name means “*one who never turns his gaze from the suffering of the world.*” He replies to Shariputra’s question, demonstrating the power of sounds and words to convey vital information needed to awaken.

For most of the sutra, Avaloketesvara—through the power of the Buddha’s illuminating presence—describes the nature of all knowable things as perceived by an unobstructed mind, free of conceptual confusion. His words are concise and he clearly states that “One who wishes to practice the profound Prajnaparamita should see in this way: see the five skandhas to be empty of nature.”

The Sanskrit word *skandha* refers to the 5 categories experience: forms, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and conscious—the entirety of the world of appearances and possibilities. Everything is subsumed within these five, which comprise the objective world that we encounter, moment by moment—whether material or conscious, sublime or mundane, or whether or not we are confused by what we see.

Throughout the remainder of the sutra, Avaloketesvara describes how to accurately understand the nature of the five skandhas. He reveals that although phenomena present themselves in an infinite variety, everything shares the same nature: the nature of emptiness.

The term “emptiness” here does not refer to a void, a mere nothingness. Emptiness is not a dismissal of experience, nor is it meant to undermine the power and efficacy of the phenomenal world. Rather, emptiness refers to the observable fact that nothing exists outside the nature of dependent relationships.

That everything arises due to the nature of interdependence, or dependent arising, is not explicitly mentioned in the Heart Sutra. And yet, it is implied and serves as the underlying principle for understanding the nature of emptiness and all that can be known.

[music]

To help us understand the connection between emptiness and dependent arising, let’s look at our identity: we may be a mother or father in relation to our children; a child in relation to our parents; a sibling in relationship to our brother or sister. We might be a student in one context, and a teacher in another; a patient when we visit the dentist; and a customer at the store. But do any of these labels truly capture who we really are?

All of these characteristics we use to define ourselves find meaning and function only in relationship. Who are we? Well, that all depends.

Avaloketesvara explains that when we look for a singular, permanent, or independent self—outside the nature of relationships—we find that the self possesses **no** intrinsic characteristics from its own side.

So, it is *because* we cannot separate ourselves from the world we move about in—that we are always aware of, bumping up against, and interacting with other things—that we are empty or free of limiting characteristics. If not for the nature of dependent arising, **everything** would be inert.

We could call dependent arising the “genesis of expression,” but it is not controlled by one dominating entity. It doesn’t have a beginning or end. It occurs without interruption through the dynamic play of infinite contingencies, a world where all things mingle with and influence each other, seemingly pushing each other into and out of apparent existence.

The principle of dependent arising doesn’t negate the uniqueness of our individual expression, the power of our ability to effectively parent our children, or the workings and precision of cause and effect. It shows us that in order for things to function and move, they have to be interdependent.

[music]

As citizens of the great nature of infinite contingencies, we can read patterns and respond to the world around us in powerful and creative ways. And yet, the world of appearances and possibilities will never lend themselves to being known in a determinate way. That life resists definition doesn’t represent a failure in our ability to know. We don’t have to look at mystery as a limitation of our basic intelligence. The ability to *bear* mystery can evoke clarity, curiosity, and humility. It begets a different kind of understanding.

And within this way of understanding, we may find that the greatest respect we can extend to ourselves and the world we encounter is to see that things are not limited to the labels we assign them. When we find ourselves in accord with the nature of life, we are in awe.

The Heart Sutra captures the wisdom of being in accord with the nature of life. And expresses itself in the mantra:

Om gate gate para gate parasamgate bodhi sva ha

Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond.

What are we going beyond? We are going beyond our ordinary habitual way of seeing things into a bigger way of understanding, known as *Prajnaparamita*, The Perfection of Wisdom.

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At the end of the sutra, the Buddha directly addresses the assembly for the first time, affirming the authenticity of Bodhisattva Avaloketesvara's instruction. *"Good, good, thus it is,"* he says, *"thus it is."*

The whole assembly rejoices upon hearing his words. Their minds bursting from the seams of limiting concepts. They celebrate their true status of being; the natural creative expression of life; and their commitment to navigate the world with respect, insight and compassion.

I humbly conclude this brief but heart-felt praise of *The Sutra of the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom*. May just hearing its title evoke insight!

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Please join us for a special online retreat: Opening the Heart Sutra, on December 9-12 of 2021. Explore the territory where dharma practice meets creativity, with Elizabeth and her special guests. For more information, visit middlewayinitiative.org.

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Open Question podcast is a production of the Middle Way Initiative by Michael Velasco, with original music from Chime Mattis. Special thanks to the Nalanda Translation Group for their translation of the sutra.