

The Heart Sutra

Commentary by Master Sheng-yen

This is the fourth article in a lecture series spoken by Shih-fu to students attending a special class at the Ch'an Center.

In the first two lines of the Heart Sutra are two more words I wish to explain, namely "coursing" and the very first word, "when." "Coursing" may also be understood as "using," "functioning," or "applying." Therefore, the sentence, "When the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was coursing in the deep prajnaparamita" can be interpreted as, "When the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was using his wisdom."

When wisdom manifests, or is being used, a bodhisattva seems no different from an ordinary sentient being. The bodhisattva, however, perceives both wisdom and its use as root wisdom, or that which manifests when vexations terminate; whereas others perceive only subsequent wisdom, or that which is used by a bodhisattva in helping to deliver sentient beings.

As we have said before, there is fundamental (root) wisdom and subsequent (acquired) wisdom. Fundamental wisdom is that which is present when there are no vexations. Subsequent wisdom is that which manifests in response to sentient beings. There is a paradox here, a chicken-and-egg problem. There is wisdom and there is the termination of vexations. Which comes first? Which leads to which? Some say you cannot have wisdom until vexations are terminated. Others say you cannot terminate vexations without wisdom. Where does this wisdom come from?

Prajna (wisdom) has four prerequisites: hearing, practice or cultivation, contemplation, and realization. According to Ch'an teachings, this is the path to experience wisdom. Other traditions may approach wisdom by a different path, but if you choose to follow Ch'an methods, then first you must listen to the teachings of the Dharma. Next, you must practice a method and use the precepts as a guide for behavior. With right understanding and proper practice, your mind will settle and become more concentrated. In this clarity and stillness, you can then contemplate, or be more keenly and directly aware of your method, your actions, and your mind. Contemplation is not to be confused with ordinary reasoning and analyzing. Contemplation does not involve thinking or discriminating. It is purely awareness. Fourth and last comes realization.

So, the bodhisattva's wisdom comes from this process of hearing, practice, contemplation and realization. With realization comes wisdom. And what is this realization? The next line of the sutra tells us: "He [Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara] perceived that all five skandhas are empty."

It is obvious, then, what "when" means. When bodhisattvas successfully complete their cultivation of the six paramitas, prajna will spontaneously arise. When prajna arises, all five skandhas are perceived as empty and vexations are terminated. This is profound enlightenment. It is not the flash of enlightenment (kensho) experienced by ordinary sentient beings, nor is it the complete enlightenment of the Buddha. Although great bodhisattvas have terminated all vexation, they still have what are called habitual tendencies, aspects (but not vexations) of their beings or

personalities which they have not yet liberated themselves from. The Buddha, on the other hand, is free from all vexations and habitual tendencies. Here is an analogy. The ignorance of sentient beings is like the clouds blocking the sun and sky. The enlightenment of bodhisattvas is the sky devoid of clouds, but still retaining a slight haze. They see the sky and sun and they think their view is clear, but it is not absolutely clear. The Buddha's sky is clear, and he also perceives the haze the great bodhisattvas do not see.

After wisdom arises there is still an issue, namely that sometimes the wisdom is functioning and sometimes it is not. When wisdom is not functioning, then the question of whether or not a bodhisattva perceives that all five skandhas are empty is meaningless. When fundamental (non-functioning) wisdom arises in a bodhisattva, the five skandhas do not exist, and neither do sentient beings nor bodhisattvas. However, when a bodhisattva's wisdom is functioning, then the five skandhas do exist, but they are perceived as being empty.

This question of functioning versus non-functioning wisdom comes from the perspective of ordinary sentient beings. Since there are innumerable sentient beings forever interacting with and needing help from bodhisattvas, there is never a moment when their wisdom is not functioning.

Summarizing, fundamental wisdom arises when, after going through the process of hearing, practicing and contemplating, one finally realizes that the five skandhas are empty. Fundamental wisdom is the culmination of this process. But since the Bodhisattva Path is one of helping all sentient beings, there is never a time when wisdom is not being used; so, in a sense, fundamental and subsequent wisdom arise simultaneously.

I now wish to dissect the line, "He perceived that all five skandhas are empty." The manifestation of fundamental wisdom and the perception that the five skandhas are empty occur simultaneously. With the perception of emptiness of the five skandhas, fundamental wisdom manifests. When fundamental wisdom manifests, the five skandhas are empty.

Buddhadharma speaks of different levels of emptiness. First is the emptiness viewed by ordinary sentient beings, which is illusory, or false, emptiness. Second is the emptiness perceived by Hinayana practitioners, or emptiness derived from analysis. Third is the emptiness of Mahayana practitioners, who see emptiness as reality.

People who believe in an illusory, or false, emptiness may say that life is an illusion and therefore feel they can do anything they want. It sounds like Buddhism, but these people speak from their intellect and imagination. These people do not understand through direct experience the principles of causes and conditions and cause and consequence (karma).

Buddhadharma states that there are causes and conditions, and cause and consequence, but there is no self-nature -- something that is unchanging, independent and eternal. It is in this sense that Buddhism uses the word emptiness. One can only understand this through direct experience, but even this truth is not ultimate emptiness. If one stops at this point, it is considered emptiness derived from analysis. Ultimate emptiness, or emptiness as reality, is where one realizes that all dharmas, whether they be mental or physical -- are empty AND existent. In other words, existence is identical to emptiness. If one has no attachments and makes no

discriminations based on a self-center, then one recognizes that every dharma exists and is empty. One recognizes that existence and emptiness are really the same thing. One further recognizes that there really is no such thing as existence or emptiness. This is the emptiness of the Mahayana tradition.

I would like to elaborate further on the distinction between the Hinayana "emptiness derived from analysis" and the Mahayana "emptiness as reality." By analysis, I mean looking at any object and saying that it exists only because of the coming together of causes and conditions. In other words, if causes and conditions break apart, there is no object. Since this can be done with everything, nothing is eternal, unchanging or independently existent. Nothing has self-nature. This is emptiness derived from analysis. Do not be misled by the term "analysis." It is not purely an intellectual endeavor. If it were, then the result would not generate wisdom. You must come to this understanding through direct experience. That is not to say one does not use the intellect at all. In fact, intellect must be involved. One first hears the analytical exposition of how things are inherently empty. One then contemplates on these concepts and through direct experience realizes their truth. Another, much rarer possibility bypasses contemplation altogether and is illustrated by stories describing the Buddha speaking such words to disciples, who, without practicing, immediately experienced enlightenment.

Practitioners of the Mahayana tradition who experience enlightenment perceive that all phenomena, in every moment, are simultaneously existent and empty. From another standpoint, one can say that Hinayana practitioners who have attained arhatship have realized the emptiness of the self and phenomena, but they have not realized the emptiness of the Dharma. They are still attached to the Dharma and use it to analyze phenomena. Mahayana practitioners let go even of the Dharma and so do not apply it to analyze things. The Heart Sutra speaks of the highest level of emptiness.

Let's move on to the next line. The five skandhas are form, sensation, perception, volition and consciousness. The Hinayana tradition places emphasis on the emptiness of the five skandhas and, since sentient beings are an aggregation of the five skandhas, the emptiness of the self. In other words, since sentient beings are composed of the five skandhas, they themselves have no self-nature. This leads Hinayana practitioners to have an aversion to the world and their practice is directed toward attaining arhatship in order to leave samsara and enter nirvana. Mahayana bodhisattvas, however, perceive that the five skandhas, as well as sentient beings, are simultaneously empty and existent. Therefore, bodhisattvas neither attach to the self and phenomena nor do they avoid them. Therefore, bodhisattvas do not seek to enter nirvana; rather, they remain in samsara in order to help sentient beings.

Of the five skandhas, only form is part of the physical realm. The remaining four make up the mental realm. Together, the five skandhas compose all universes, all beings who inhabit them, and all phenomena. Form, the physical skandha, is sometimes divided into four elements: earth, water, wind and fire. These four elements are the components of our human body as well as the environment in which we live.

The other skandhas refer to mental activities. Here, we are limiting our discussion to human beings. Sensation is what occurs when we come into contact with the environment. Perception is the judgment or awareness of what we have interacted with. Volition is the

decision or will to respond to the interaction, whether it be by thought, speech, or action.

The fifth skandha is consciousness. The consciousness skandha is much more than what we usually refer to as consciousness. In fact, the combination of sensation, perception and volition make up what we ordinarily call consciousness, that being our thought process. The fifth skandha is that which results when form, sensation, perception and volition interact. It includes the consciousness we normally refer to as cognition, but it is much more. The consciousness that is the fifth skandha is that which we define as the self. It is the "I" that holds the other four skandhas together. It is the fifth skandha which is the recipient and creator of karma. It is the fifth skandha which continues from life to life. We can say that the fifth skandha is the consequence of previous karma; and karma is that which results from the interaction of the first four skandhas. Therefore, the fifth skandha, or "I" consciousness, is self-perpetuating.

The Mind Only (Yogacara) school speaks of the sixth, seventh and eighth consciousnesses, with the eighth consciousness being the karmic storehouse for sentient beings. The sixth consciousness corresponds to sensation, perception and volition, and that ordinary part of consciousness which reasons. The eighth consciousness would correspond with the deeper levels of consciousness. The Heart Sutra, however, came before the teachings of the Mind Only school, so it makes no mention of these different levels of consciousness. It should be mentioned that consciousness without the other four skandhas cannot produce karma. In fact, if any one of the five skandhas is absent, then the entire reaction breaks down. All five skandhas are necessary for interaction.

The five skandhas are the essence of our being, and whether we intellectually grasp the concept or not, we must become disattached from them. To attain liberation, we must hear the Dharma, practice methods and contemplate the five skandhas until we directly realize their true nature.

Mahayana bodhisattvas such as Avalokitesvara perceive the five skandhas from the standpoint of emptiness as reality, that is they perceive that emptiness and existence are one and the same. Hinayana arhats focus on the aspect of emptiness. Ordinary sentient beings can only speak of emptiness from an intellectual standpoint, which is a false emptiness. They may say the five skandhas are empty, but they still have vexations and attachments.

We must practice until we develop wisdom. Hinayana arhats have developed the Eye of Wisdom, which liberates them from the self, but not from the Dharma. Mahayana bodhisattvas have the Eye of Dharma, which liberates them from all attachments. As ordinary sentient beings, we can use one of the five methods of stilling the mind, such as the contemplation of causes and conditions. Or we can use a method described in the Surangama Sutra, which is to look at any one of the five skandhas as being empty at any given moment. If you can recognize one of these five skandhas as being empty, you will perceive that the other four are also empty.

The literal meaning of the word I have translated as "perceived" is, "looking or viewing with illumination." Again, looking or viewing has many levels, depending on whether you are an ordinary sentient being, an arhat, or a bodhisattva. Illumination is wisdom, therefore the perception the sutra speaks of is limited to arhats and bodhisattvas. Ordinary sentient beings can look and may even have

the proper view, but they do not have the wisdom to go along with it.

The most difficult part of the Heart Sutra to understand is now over.