The Sutra of the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore (Heart Sutra)

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Avalokiteshvara
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 realisation he overcame all Ill-being.

“Listen Sariputra,
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 Sariputra,
all phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness:
their true nature is the nature of no Birth no Death,
no Being no Non-being, 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 Nirvana.
“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 Sariputra,
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,
Gate, gate, pāragate, pārasaṃgate, bodhi svāhā,
Gate, gate, pāragate, pārasaṃgate, bodhi svāhā!”

The Heart of Understanding
Commentaries of the Prajñaparamita Sutra
Thich Nhat Hanh

EMPTY OF WHAT?

The Bodhisattva Avalokita,
while moving in the deep course of Perfect Understanding,
shed light on the Five Skandhas and found them equally empty.

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. Avalokita is the shorter name of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Avalokita is neither male nor female and sometimes appears as a man and sometimes as a woman. In Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese, this bodhisattva's name is sometimes translated as Guanyin, Quan Am, Gwaneum, and Kannon, which means "the one who listens and hears the cries of the world in order to corne and help." Avalokiteshvara also embodies the spirit of non-fear, as he himself has transcended fear. The Prajñaparamita Heart Sutra is his wonderful gift to us.

Perfect Understanding is prajñaparamita in Sanskrit. The word "wisdom" is usually used to translate prajña, but I think that wisdom is somehow not able to convey the meaning. Understanding is like water flowing in a stream. Wisdom and knowledge are solid and can block our understanding. In Buddhism, knowledge is regarded as an obstacle for understanding. If we take something to be the truth, we may cling to it so much that even if the truth cornes and knocks at our door, we won't want to let it in.We have to be able to transcend our previous knowledge in the same way we climb up a ladder. If we are on the fifth rung and think that we are very high, there is no hope for us to step up to the sixth.We must learn to transcend our own views. Understanding, like water, can flow, can penetrate. Views, knowledge, and even wisdom are solid, and can block the way of understanding.

According to Avalokiteshvara, this sheet of paper is empty; but according to our analysis, it is full of everything. There seems to be a contradiction between our observation and his. Avalokita found the five skandhas empty. But, empty of what? The key word is empty. To be empty is 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, "Yes, itis 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?" My cup is empty of water, but it is not empty of air. To be empty is to be empty of something. This is quite a discovery. When Avalokita says that the five skandhas are equally empty, to help him be précisé we must ask, "Mr. Avalokita, empty of what?"

The five skandhas, which may be translated into English as five heaps, or five aggregates, are the five elements that comprise a human being.These five elements flow like a river in every one

of us. in fact, these are really five rivers flowing together in us: the river of form, which means our body; the river of feelings; the river of perceptions; the river of mental formations; and the river of consciousness. They are always flowing in us. So according to Avalokita, when he looked deeply into the nature of these five rivers, he suddenly saw that all five are empty.

And if we ask, "Empty of what?" he has to answer. And this is what he said. "They are empty of a separate self." That means 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 the others. 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.

When Avalokita says that our sheet of paper is empty, he means it is empty of a separate, indépendant 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 it seems that our observation and that of Avalokita do not contradict each other after all.

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.

LONG LIVE EMPTINESS!

"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.

Form is the wave and emptiness is the water. To understand this, we have to think differently than many of us who were raised in the West were trained to think.

In the West, when we draw a circle, we consider it to be zero, nothingness. But in India and many other Asian countries, a circle means totality, wholeness. The meaning is the opposite. So “form is emptiness, and emptiness is form” is like wave is water, water is wave. "Form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form. The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness,” because these contain each other. Because one exists, everything exists.

In the Vietnamese literary canon, there are two lines of poetry by a twelfth-century Zen master of the Ly dynasty that say:

If the cosmos exists, then the smallest speck of dust exists.
If the smallest speck of dust doesn’t exist, then the whole cosmos doesn’t exist.

The poet means that the notions of existence and nonexistence are just created by our minds. He also said that
“the entire cosmos can be put on the tip of a hair,”
and *“the sun and the moon can be seen in a mustard seed.”*

These images show us that one contains everything, and everything is just one.

Because form is emptiness, form is possible. In form we find everything else—feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. “Emptiness” means empty of a sep-arate self. It is full of everything, full of life. The word “emptiness” should not scare us. It is a wonderful word. To be empty does not mean to be nonexistent. If the sheet of paper is not empty, how could the sunshine, the logger, and the forest corne into it? How could it be a sheet of paper? The cup, in order to be empty, has to be there. Form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, in order to be empty of a separate self, have to be there.

Emptiness is the ground of everything. “Thanks to emptiness, everything is possible.”That is a déclaration made by Nagarjuna, a Buddhist philosopher of the second century. Emptiness is quite an optimistic concept. If I am not empty, I cannot be here. And if you are not empty, you cannot be there. Because you are there, I can be here.This is the true meaning of emptiness. Form does not have a separate existence. Avalokita wants us to understand this point.

If we are not empty, we become a block of matter. We cannot breathe, we cannot think. To be empty means to be alive, to breathe in and to breathe out. We cannot be alive if we are not empty. Emptiness is impermanence, it is change. We should not complain about impermanence, because without impermanence nothing is possible. A Buddhist who came to see me from Great Britain complained that life was empty and impermanent. (He had been a Buddhist for five years and had thought about emptiness and impermanence a great deal.) He told me that one day his fourteen-year-old daughter told him, “Daddy, please don’t complain about impermanence. Without impermanence, how can I grow up?” Of course she was right.

When you have a kernel of corn and you entrust it to the soil, you hope that it will become a tall corn plant. If there is no impermanence, the kernel of corn will remain a kernel of corn forever and you will never have an ear of corn to eat. Impermanence is crucial to the life of everything. Instead of complaining about impermanence, we might say,

“*Long live impermanence!”*

Thanks to impermanence, everything is possible. That is a very optimistic note. And it is the same with emptiness. Emptiness is important because without emptiness, nothing is possible. So we should also say, “Long live emptiness!” Emptiness is the basis of everything. Thanks to emptiness, life itself is possible. All the five skandhas follow this same principle.