The Venerable Sangharakshita

Lecture 73: THE HEART SUTRA

(1967)

Venerable Sirs and friends, as you all know I am sure, at present we're in the midst of the holiday season; and inasmuch as we are in the midst of the holiday season with so many people going away to different parts of the country, even different parts of the world, it is perhaps rather surprising that we have so many people here this morning, in fact staying for the whole day. But nevertheless perhaps, looking at it from another point of view, it isn't so surprising. Now some of you I do know, and maybe there are others whom I don't know, will be going away quite shortly to different parts of the continent, even in some cases different parts of Asia. And when we do this, when we leave these familiar shores, when we see, at least metaphorically, weather permitting, the white cliffs of Dover fading behind us, we begin to enter a new world, a foreign world, something strange, something unfamiliar, something unaccustomed, and it's only gradually that we do get used, we do get accustomed to that new world. Probably all of you have been abroad at some time or other, and I am sure you will agree with me when I say that it does take quite a little getting used to.

Now the same sort of thing happens when we enter not just a new, a different geographical area, not just a different portion of the earth's surface, but when we enter or try to enter a whole new world of thought and of experience. And this is the case for many of us, I know, when we come into contact for the first time with Buddhism, with the teaching of the Buddha. Quite a number of you I know came into contact with Buddhism first of all through one or another of our weekly meditation classes. And I am quite sure when you came along first, the first time you attended one of those classes, there must have been much which seemed strange, which seemed unfamiliar, or which even seemed rather bizarre, eh? Some of you may recollect that your first impression was of candles burning on the altar in front of the image, and no doubt you noticed that there was a strange aroma, a strange perfume which you eventually identified as incense, and you saw no doubt different people sitting in what must have seemed all sorts of peculiar postures, usually cross-legged upon the floor, some sitting on little stools, and on occasions you might have seen one or two people sitting with their face to the wall. And not only that, those who stayed long enough, those who stuck it out as it were, you would have become aware sometimes of chanting going on in an unfamiliar, in fact an unknown language. Rhythmical chanting. And eventually you might have discovered that this chanting was of a text in an ancient, in fact dead, Indian language called Sanskrit. And if you had persisted in your enquiries, if you'd asked about it, you would eventually have discovered that what was being chanted at the beginning of every meditation session, in Sanskrit, was something known as THE HEART SUTRA, and you probably would have realised, from the way in which you were told this, that this Heart Sutra was very important for some reason or other you weren't quite sure what or why.

So this morning, in the course of this talk, I am going to try and clear up the mystery, at least to some extent. I can't hope in the course of one hour or so to do more than just lift perhaps a corner of the veil. And this morning I shall be having very much in mind the needs of those who are comparatively new to Buddhism and who have not perhaps read the Heart Sutra in translation. At the same time I hope that this talk may be useful not only to beginners, not only to newcomers, but even to those who already are quite familiar with the work, at least verbally, who might have read it already quite a number of times. I do know in fact that even some of those who have read the Heart Sutra, who've heard it chanted perhaps scores of times, who've gone through the translations, who've puzzled over them, are still not quite sure, not quite clear what the Heart Sutra is all about.

But before we go any further, let us just read the Heart Sutra. There are two versions in existence in the original Sanskrit, and I am going to read the shorter of the two, which happens also to be the more popular, and I am going to use Dr Conze's translation because that is the most literal.

THE HEART SUTRA

Homage to the Perfection of Wisdom, the Lovely, the Holy !

Avalokita, the Holy Lord and Bodhisattva was moving in the deep course of the Wisdom which has gone beyond. He looked down from on high, he beheld but five heaps, and he saw that in their own-being they were empty.

Here, O Sariputra, form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, nor does form differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form, the same is true of feeling, perception, impulses and consciousness.

Here, O Sariputra, all *dharmas* are marked with emptiness; they are neither produced nor stopped, neither defiled nor immaculate, neither deficient nor complete.

Therefore, O Sariputra, where there is emptiness there is neither form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor impulse, nor consciousness; no eye or ear or nose or tongue or body or mind; no form, nor sound, nor smell, nor taste, nor touchable nor object of mind; no sight-organ element, and so forth, until we come to: no mind consciousness element; there is no ignorance, nor extinction of ignorance, and so forth, until we come to: there is no decay and death, no extinction of decay and death. There is no suffering, nor origination, nor stopping, nor path. There is no cognition, no attainment and no non-attainment.

Therefore, O Sariputra, owing to a Bodhisattva's indifference to any kind of personal attainment, and through his having relied upon the Perfection of Wisdom, he dwells without thought-coverings. In the absence of thought-coverings he has not been made to tremble, he has overcome what can upset, in the end sustained by Nirvana.

All those who appear as Buddhas in the three periods of time fully awake to the utmost, right and perfect Enlightenment because they have relied upon the perfection of wisdom.

Therefore one should know the *prajnaparamita* as the great spell, the spell of great knowledge, the utmost spell, the unequalled spell, allayer of all suffering, in truth - for what could go wrong? By the prajnaparamita has this spell been delivered. It runs like this:

Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond, O what an awakening, all-hail !

Well, this is the sutra, this is the text, in Conze's translation of the Heart Sutra. Now I have no intention of giving a word for word commentary, that would be rather difficult and it perhaps wouldn't be of any great general interest. But I'd like to begin by saying a few words about the title of this work.

1. In Sanskrit the title is *Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra*. So let's begin at the end and ask first of all, what is a SUTRA? This is one of the terms that you'll constantly be encountering in your study of Buddhism. So what is a sutra? A sutra, which in a way is the basic Buddhist text, a sutra is a discourse spoken by the Buddha. If anything is regarded as canonical, if it's regarded as issuing from the lips of the Buddha himself, it's usually called a sutra. So a sutra means a text, a canonical text, a scripture embodying the Buddha's own teaching. Now broadly speaking there are in Buddhist literature two kinds of sutra which are usually known as Hinayana sutras and Mahayana sutras. Some of the Hinayana sutras are in Pali, others are in Sanskrit, but all the Mahayana sutras are in Sanskrit. And the Heart Sutra is a Mahayana sutra and it is, as we've already seen, in Sanskrit.

2. Now secondly, the Heart Sutra is a *PRAJNAPARAMITA* sutra. Let's see what this means. The Mahayana sutras themselves are divided into several groups. I'm not going to go into that in detail. But the most important group, perhaps, is the group of what is known as Prajnaparamita sutras, or Perfection of Wisdom sutras. And this is a very large group of sutras indeed. There are altogether about thirty-five independent texts all known as prajnaparamita sutras, and some of these texts are very lengthy indeed. And as their name suggests, all these texts, all thirty-five of them, deal with *prajna* or wisdom; or rather, strictly speaking, they deal with *prajnaparamita*, sometimes translated as perfect wisdom, sometimes as transcendental wisdom, and sometimes rather more literally as the 'wisdom that goes beyond'.

Now the question that arises at this point is, admitting or recognising that the prajnaparamita texts deal with

wisdom or perfect wisdom, what is wisdom? What do we mean by wisdom? The English word 'wisdom' is unfortunately rather vague. It can mean 'worldly wisdom', it can mean something more philosophical. Well the Sanskrit word *prajna* is more precise. *Prajna* comes from a root, a Sanskrit root, meaning 'to know'. And the prefix *pra* is what we may call an emphatic prefix which makes the succeeding stronger, as it were. So *prajna*, we may say, is not just knowledge, it's supreme knowledge, or even superlative knowledge, or we may say knowledge *par excellence*. Or we can say, again, Knowledge, with a capital 'K', this is *prajna*. But knowledge of what? In knowledge of what does wisdom or *prajna* consist? And the answer to this question in all Buddhist literature, in all Buddhist tradition and teaching, is quite straightforward, quite unambiguous: knowledge in this sense, knowledge as *prajna*, means knowledge of Reality, knowledge of things as they really are, knowledge of things if you like in their ultimate depths, their ultimate transcendental dimension.

But in what more precisely, one may ask, does this knowledge of Reality consist? Reality after all is only a word. What sort of content can one give? To this question there are, within the context of Mahayana Buddhist thought, principally two answers. And these two answers are not, or not necessarily, mutually exclusive. According to Hinayana tradition, seeing things in reality, or knowing reality, or just knowing, just knowledge, *prajna*, consists in seeing what we usually think of, or what we usually perceive as things, objects in the external world, and persons, in terms of what are technically known as *dharmas*. Now *dharma* has many meanings. It usually means teaching, doctrine, but here it means something quite different. Here, the *dharmas* are the ultimate psycho-physical elements or events. According to general Buddhist teaching (this is emphasises especially in the Hinayana) there is in reality no such objective existence, no such objective thing as, for instance, house or tree or man or woman. If we look at them closely, if we examine them, if we analyse them, they become as it were insubstantial. They tend to reduce themselves to a flux, to a flow, of impersonal, non-substantial, psycho-physical processes which, in Buddhist tradition, are called *dharmas*. In a context of, for instance, physics which speaks in terms of not only the atom but of the electron and the proton and the neutron and so on, it's rather easier for us nowadays to understand this aspect of Buddhist teaching, of so-called solid, objective material things
being resolved or dissolved into ultimate elements or processes. But Buddhism also applies this to the mind, applies it to existence as a whole, and it, as I said, dissolves or resolves things which we usually think of as objective, existing out there, dissolves people, persons, also into the psycho-physical processes, these ultimate elements, which in Buddhism we call *dharmas*.

Now in different schools of Buddhism there are different lists of *dharmas* but all these schools, that is to say all the Hinayana schools especially, agree that wisdom consists in reducing all the phenomena of existence to a flux of what are called *dharmas*, these ultimate, irreducible elements. According to the Mahayana however, wisdom consists in the knowledge of *sunyata* or voidness. Now voidness doesn't just mean emptiness in a negative sense. It's not just something like empty space. Voidness, *sunyata*, is the usual or the most usual Mahayana term for Ultimate Reality. And it consists in reducing the *dharmas* themselves, those elements, those processes, which according to the Hinayana are ultimate, consists in reducing the *dharmas* themselves to *sunyata*. When we see things in terms of objects, in terms of persons, this the Mahayana would say is on account of our gross delusion. And this gross delusion is removed by learning to see these objects and persons in terms of *dharmas*. But the Mahayana goes on to say that seeing things and persons in terms of *dharmas* is not enough. To see things in terms of *dharmas* is not to see them in their Ultimate Reality. We see them in terms of *dharmas*, according to the Mahayana, on account not of gross delusion but on account of subtle delusion, and this subtle delusion too must be removed. And we remove it by seeing, by knowing that the *dharmas* themselves are *sunyata*.

Now wisdom in this sense, in the Mahayana sense, is known as the perfection of wisdom, *prajnaparamita*. Now this isn't a very good translation, perfection of wisdom. *paramita* means, literally, 'gone to the other shore' or 'that which is transcendental'. So the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras, the *Prajnaparamita* literature, the scriptures, these are concerned with wisdom, with *prajna*, in this sense, in the sense of *Prajnaparamita* or perfection of wisdom or transcendental wisdom. And they are concerned above all with seeing all *dharmas* as *sunyata*; in piercing, in penetrating not only beyond objects, beyond persons, but even beyond the psycho-physical processes which make up those things and those persons. In other words, the perfection of wisdom is concerned, we may say, with seeing
reality everywhere. Seeing it at all times, in all places, and under all circumstances. This is the perfection of wisdom, seeing *sunyata* everywhere.

3. Now thirdly and lastly, the work with which we are dealing, the Heart Sutra, is the *prajnaparamita HRIDAYA sutra*. So what does HRIDAYA mean? *Hridaya* means 'heart' and it also means 'essence'. So the *hridaya* sutra is thus the heart or the essence of the perfection of wisdom. It's also the heart or the essence of the texts, the sutras, the scriptures of that name. Now let us go into this a little. I've already mentioned that

there are about thirty-five independent perfection of wisdom texts in existence, and these thirty-five texts didn't come into existence all at once. The entire tradition of course was originally an oral one and portions of the oral tradition were written down only bit by bit. As literary documents, the composition of the *prajnaparamita* literature extends over a period of about six hundred years, which is rather a long time, from about 100 BC to about 500 AD. And within this period there are three as it were sub-periods, each lasting roughly for about two hundred years.

(a) First of all there was the period of what we may describe as the elaboration of the basic texts. At this time, in this period, two - these the most ancient *prajnaparamita* sutras - were produced. One is known as the *Ratnaguna-samcayagatha* which means 'The Verses on the Collection of Precious Qualities', the precious qualities being those, of course, of Enlightenment or Buddhahood, and this text, which isn't very long, is in verse. And secondly, there is a work called the *Astasahasrika prajnaparamita*, and this means 'The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines', and this is in prose. Both of these texts are available in English and the second of them especially, The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines, is very very rich indeed in content. So the first period in the composition of the *prajnaparamita* literature saw the production of these two most ancient texts.

(b) Now the second period is the period of the amplification of the basic texts. A number of works were produced during this period, in which the earlier texts, the more ancient texts, were as it were spun out to an ever greater and greater length by going into greater and greater detail. So the most famous work to be produced in this period is 'The Perfection of Wisdom in A Hundred Thousand Lines'. There is an interesting tradition connected with this text. It's a Tibetan tradition, and according to this tradition this particular text, 'The Perfection of Wisdom in A Hundred Thousand Lines', was presented to the great Mahayana sage, Nagarjuna, by a dragon princess, a naga princess, and the tradition runs that the text had been preserved up to that time in the depths of the ocean in the Naga or the Dragon Palace. Now in Tibetan art we find very often a very charming representation of this episode. You see a great expanse of water and floating on the water you see a raft and on the raft there is the figure of the sage, Nagarjuna; and coming up out of the water there is figure which looks, we would say, rather like a mermaid, and she is carrying a big heavy book, and this is 'The Perfection of Wisdom in A Hundred Thousand Lines', and she is handing it over to Nagarjuna. The tradition being that when the Buddha had preached the sutra originally it was so profound and so difficult that nobody could understand it, so he handed it over, after it had been written down, to the nagas to be kept in the depths of the ocean until such time as somebody arose who could understand it and propagate and make known its contents. So Nagarjuna was this person. Now it's rather easy to smile at these old legends but they do have a significance. The ocean, after all, represents we may say the Unconscious with a capital 'U', the Unconscious, in perhaps the Jungian sense, and the nagas, the dragons, these are the forces of the unconscious, forces of inspiration if you like, emerging from the depths of the unconscious. So the fact that the text, 'The Perfection of Wisdom in A Hundred Thousand Lines', is delivered to Nagarjuna by a dragon princess, a naga princess, after being kept for centuries, for generations in the depths of the ocean, in the palace of the naga king - this has a significance. It represents or it symbolises the fact that this sutra, this teaching doesn't spring from an ordinary level of consciousness. It isn't the product of the conceptual mind, it isn't the product of the brain, of the intellect. It comes from sources infinitely deeper, sources to which in modern times we, as I say, usually give the term 'the Unconscious', from a different dimension of consciousness, from something if you like higher, from something transcendental, but not from the ordinary level of consciousness. This is what the legend seems to signify.

Now in addition to this version, 'The Perfection of Wisdom in A Hundred Thousand Lines', there are a number of other lengthy versions: there's one in ten thousand lines, there's another in eighteen thousand lines, and there's another in twenty-five thousand lines, and they are all of them available in English, having been translated very laboriously over a period of some twenty years by Dr Edward Conze.

(c) Now the third period in the production of this literature is the period of condensation. You can well imagine that with all these sutras in existence, hundred thousand lines long and twenty-five thousand lines long, the whole literature, the whole teaching had become so voluminous and so vast that it wasn't possible even for monks, even the full-timers, to study it all. So therefore in this third period a number of very short sutras, perfection of wisdom sutras, were produced. And these short sutras present the perfection of wisdom teaching in a highly condensed and a highly concentrated form. Indians of course usually go to extremes. Having expanded the perfection of wisdom to a hundred thousand lines, what do they do in this period? They contract it into one letter. This is the shortest of all the perfection of wisdom sutras. The perfection of wisdom delivered in one letter. It's all there in that one letter.

Now you may be wondering what is this one letter. Well, it's a letter you've been acquainted with all your

lives, in fact the first letter that you ever learned is simply the letter 'A', the letter 'A'. And in this particular sutra, which is called 'The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in one letter', the Buddha says that you've got it all here, in this one letter 'A', the whole of the perfection of wisdom. Now how is that? Well it's very simple really: in the Sanskrit language, 'A' is a negative prefix, a negative prefix. In other words, it means 'no' or 'not'. So if you've got a word in Sanskrit and you want to negate that word, you put an 'a' in front of it. If you got, for instance, mind (*manas*) and you want to say 'no mind', 'not mind', you say *amanas*. Or if you want to say 'consciousness' (vijnana), then 'no consciousness', *avijnana'*. So 'a' means 'not', 'not this', 'not that'. So in other words, the fact that the whole of the perfection of wisdom is concentrated in this one letter 'a' means that *sunyata*, the voidness or ultimate reality is to be experienced, is to be known only by the negation of all concepts by putting 'a', as it were 'not this', in front of everything that you can think and everything that you can say, even the Buddhistic concepts, even Buddhistic thoughts, even Buddhistic philosophy. So the 'a' here, the 'not', is rather like we may say the 'nati nati', 'not this, not this', of the Upanishadic tradition where every thought, every concept, every idea about reality is negated, is transcended, is left behind. And we find the same sort of thing in the West, up to a certain point, in what is known as the *via negativa*, the negative way, of Western mysticism when one says not this, not that, when one leaves everything far behind or tries to. The difficulty of course with Western mysticism is that the mystics usually get stuck when they come to God and they can't get rid of that. Buddhists of course ultimately are told that they have to get rid even of the concept 'Buddha', even of the concept Enlightenment. In the West, owing to the greater strength of theology, there are certain concepts which even the mystics find very difficult to get over, difficult to transcend.

Now we're not really concerned with 'the perfection of wisdom in one letter' this morning. I mention it just as an example of the way in which Indian thought can rather go to extremes. The two best known of these shorter texts are THE DIAMOND SUTRA (the*Vajracchedika*) and THE HEART SUTRA itself. And both of these are very highly popular indeed in Tibetan Buddhism and in Zen. In fact they are very very popular throughout the entire Mahayana Buddhist world.

Well at least we can understand now why the Heart Sutra is so called. It represents, it constitutes the heart or the essence of the *prajnaparamita* or the perfection of wisdom teaching, and it gives us in a concentrated, a highly condensed and concentrated form, the essential meaning of all the perfection of wisdom sutras. No wonder therefore that throughout the East, especially in the Mahayana Buddhist countries it is recited and chanted so often. If we know this, if we really know the Heart Sutra, in a sense we know everything.

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No let us come to the sutra itself, the Heart Sutra itself. And here there are mainly two things to be considered. First of all, the literary form of the sutra and secondly its spiritual content. Now I'm going to begin by making what may appear at first to be a rather startling suggestion; and that is, that in this sutra, in the Heart Sutra, form and content are of equal importance; that the form of the sutra is in reality part of the content itself; that the frame, as it were, is really part of the picture; or to coin a phrase, that the medium is the message.

Now let's go into this in detail. First of all, the structure of the sutra is dramatic. It's a sort of dialogue, this sutra. I think if we start thinking of the sutra in this way, it will become easier to understand. It's a sort of dialogue. It's a dialogue between two characters. It's a dialogue between Avalokitesvara on the one hand, and Sariputra on the other. So we have to enquire, who are they? And what do they represent? If we understand this, who these two characters in the dialogue are and what they represent, then we shall understand a very great deal of the meaning of the sutra.

Now Avalokitesvara is one of the great Bodhisattvas, a Bodhisattva being in the highest sense a sort of embodiment of one particular, one special aspect of Enlightenment, of Buddhahood. So Avalokitesvara is one of these great Bodhisattvas, and here in this context he represents perfect wisdom. Avalokitesvara here in this dialogue, as it were, in this sutra speaks for perfect wisdom. He represents, he embodies perfect wisdom. Usually, in the general Mahayana context, Avalokitesvara represents or embodies compassion. We say that Manjusri represents wisdom, Avalokitesvara compassion, Vajrapani power. But here he represents wisdom, perfect wisdom, transcendental wisdom, or *prajnaparamita*. Of course, ultimately wisdom and compassion are inseparable. Through wisdom one knows voidness, reality. Through compassion one makes it known to others. The name Avalokitesvara means 'The Lord who looks down', and he looks down in compassion. And here in the sutra, at the beginning, he's shown as looking down in compassion on the world, out of the depths of his wisdom, his perfect wisdom, and looking down in compassion especially on Sariputra. So just imagine, just visualise this scene as it were, the great Bodhisattva, Avalokitesvara, the embodiment of wisdom, looking down in compassion on the world and on Sariputra.

Now who is Sariputra? Historically, Sariputra is one of the Buddha's two chief disciples. The other chief disciple was of course Maha-Moggallana. Maha-Moggallana was famous for his psychic powers, his *iddhi*, but Sariputra was famous for his wisdom. Now according to tradition, Sariputra was the founder of the *Abhidharma*. I'm sorry to have to introduce these technical terms but we can hardly avoid them. The *Abhidharma* means that particular branch of Buddhism which specialises in the study of the *dharmas*, that is to say specialises in the study of these ultimate elements to which the whole process of existence can be reduced. So in this context, in the Heart Sutra, Sariputra stands for wisdom in the more Hinayana sense.

So now we've got a clue as it were to the meaning of the whole work. The whole sutra, the whole of the Heart Sutra, is as it were a dialogue between wisdom on the one hand and perfect wisdom on the other. Not only a dialogue, almost a clash you may say, a tension between wisdom and perfect wisdom. Or if you like between, at a somewhat lower level, spiritual insight (represented by Avalokitesvara) and the more intellectual type of understanding (represented by Sariputra). And it's rather significant perhaps that in this dialogue, at least in the shorter version of the sutra, Sariputra doesn't actually say anything, he doesn't actually say anything. In other words, we can say that in this sort of context, in the context of the Heart Sutra, the intellect doesn't answer back, which is what it's usually doing. It's reached the point where it's able to transcend itself. One of the great Christian mystics says: "Reason dies in giving birth to ecstasy". So we can also see that wisdom dies in giving birth to perfect wisdom. We can also say that the sutra, the Heart Sutra, represents what is in a way the central situation of the spiritual life. It represents wisdom in process of becoming perfect wisdom. It represents the *dharmas* in the process of being dissolved into *sunyata*. It represents intellectual understanding in process of being transformed into spiritual insight. And when we read the sutra, when we recite the sutra, when we reflect upon the sutra, we have to remember that this situation represented by the sutra is not outside us. It's inside us. We have to remember that Sariputra is inside us. That Avalokitesvara, too, is inside us. And we have to realise that the Sariputra in us must learn to listen to, to hearken to the Avalokitesvara in us.

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Now from the form of the sutra let us pass to the content. As I've already said, the two - form and content - are not really different. The form of the sutra says dramatically what the content says didactically. The form, the literary form, of the sutra speaks in terms of images. It addresses the unconscious. The content of the sutra uses concepts. It addresses the conscious mind. But both deliver, in their respective media, the same message. Now the content of the sutra, the conceptual content of the sutra consists mainly in six great statements made by Avalokitesvara to Sariputra. And these six great statements we may say are like six great thunderclaps which shatter all Sariputra's prejudices, which destroy the lower wisdom, and which reveal the higher wisdom. So what does Avalokitesvara say to Sariputra in this dialogue, in this drama as it were of the spiritual life?

First of all, Avalokitesvara says (and these are not the exact words of the sutra always), first of all he says:

THE FIVE SKANDHAS ARE EMPTY,

the five *skandhas* are empty. Now a word of explanation is required here. The *skandhas* in Buddhism, the five groups or the five aggregates, are:

- FORM (material form)
- FEELINGS (pleasant, painful and neutral)
- PERCEPTION
- IMPULSES
- CONSCIOUSNESS

and according to the general Buddhist teaching, accepted by all schools, these five groups, these five aggregates, which make up the entire phenomena of existence, these are empty of any such entity as a soul or a self. In other words, whether one is dealing with things or whether one is dealing with persons, according to this Buddhist teaching one can discuss them completely exhaustively in terms of form, feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness. It isn't necessary to bring in any separate, independent category as

a self or soul. What we speak of as or what we call the self, according to this teaching is not anything independent of the *skandhas*, not anything independent of form, feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness, but only a sort of label for the *skandhas* themselves, or the five groups themselves, in their collective aspect.

Now this statement represents common ground between Sariputra and Avalokitesvara, or in other words between the Hinayana and the Mahayana: that the five *skandhas* are empty, that the whole phenomena of existence can be reduced to form, feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness. Nothing beyond that, no self, no soul. So they both start from this point, both Sariputra and Avalokitesvara, both Hinayana and Mahayana. That the five *skandhas* exhaust the whole of existence.

So Avalokitesvara then makes his second great statement. He says:

ALL DHARMAS ARE EMPTY.

He started off by saying that they five *skandhas* are empty, empty of a self, of a soul, but now he says all *dharmas* are empty. He goes a bit further. And here we begin to get into deep water and if we're not very careful some of us will drown.

First of all, let me say a word about the *Abhidharma*, in other words the tradition of which Sariputra was the reputed founder. Early Buddhism classified, as we've seen, the whole of existence under the headings of the five *skandhas*. Whatever you could find, anywhere, it could either be classified as rupa (form), or feelings or perceptions, and so on. But the *Abhidharma* tradition rejected this five *skandha* classification. It wasn't quite as it were scientific enough for the *Abhidharma*. And the *Abhidharma* replaced the original five *skandha* classification with a four-fold classification into: FORM, THOUGHT, MENTAL CONCOMITANTS and MISCELLANEOUS. And each of these was sub-divided, again and again. And these ultimate sub-divisions of these four categories, these coincide with or these are the *dharmas*; in other words the irreducible elements beyond which analysis cannot go.

Now according to the Sarvastivada, one of the most important if not the most important school of the Hinayana, there are seventy-two of these *dharmas*, seventy-two. And these are known as the Seventy-two conditioned *dharmas*, the seventy-two ultimate irreducible elements to which the whole of phenomenal conditioned existence can be reduced. And there's also a much shorter list of three unconditioned *dharmas*, consisting of space and the two kinds of nirvana. So altogether you've got seventy-five *dharmas*. So these are the famous, not to say celebrated seventy-five *dharmas* of the Sarvastivada school. And they were classified in various ways. And we may say that the early *abhidharmikas* had a great deal of fun classifying and cataloguing their *dharmas* in all sorts of different ways. First of all, as we've seen, they classified them into conditioned and unconditioned: there were seventy-two which were conditioned, which arose by way of cause and condition; and three which were not conditioned, which were eternal, in that way seventy-five altogether. Then they classified them into *dharmas* which were produced and *dharmas* which were stopped; and then *dharmas* which were defiled and *dharmas* which were not defiled; and then *dharmas* which were complete and *dharmas* which were not complete. I've no time to go into details. I just want to give you a general idea of the whole thing, the whole field, for reasons which you shall understand in a minute.

Now Avalokitesvara, in his second great statement, asserts that all these *dharmas* are empty. All these *dharmas*, that is to say the seventy-five *dharmas* of the Sarvastivada, the whole apparatus as it were of scholasticism is empty. Now what does this mean? It means not ultimately real. It means that the whole elaborate structure of the seventy-five *dharmas* (and believe me, it was an elaborate structure - I'm sure you've no idea how elaborate it was - there's volume upon volume upon volume of analysis and co-ordination of *dharmas*, and all sorts of things like that; you can understand perhaps how complicated it did all become when they worked out in some schools the scores upon scores of different types of relationship between *dharmas*, and that gave them tens of thousands of permutations) but according to Avalokitesvara all this, all this system represents only a provisional intellectual structure. All the *dharmas* are empty, not ultimately real, must go beyond. So with this statement, that all *dharmas* are empty, Avalokitesvara destroys as it were with one stroke the entire edifice of *Abhidharma* scholasticism. He says it's all right as far as it goes. Yes, it carries you quite a long distance, it helps dispel this gross illusion that things are things and persons are persons. It enables you to get a bit deeper than that but the *dharmas* themselves are not really ultimate. The *dharmas* themselves, this whole complex, elaborate system of analysis and classification is only a product of the subtle mental activity, the subtle activity of the mind. And it represents a subtle veil and a subtle delusion which must ultimately be transcended. So all *dharmas* are empty. There's a more general application of this great statement: we can say, generalising, that perfect wisdom destroys all philosophies. It destroys all attempts to

give a systematic, intellectual account of reality, whether philosophical or, we may say, scientific, whether that of the *Abhidharma* or any other. So with this second great statement, 'all *dharmas* are empty', Avalokitesvara representing perfect wisdom destroys, smashes, pulverises if you like, all systematic intellectual constructions about reality. But this is the only way you can get to reality, by getting rid of, by destroying your ideas about reality, however subtle, however sophisticated, however convincing they may seem to be. All *dharmas* are empty.

Third statement:

IN SUNYATA NO DHARMAS EXIST

This is the corollary of the previous statement. The more positive counterpart if you like of the previous statement. It means, or rather it suggests that reality is quite bare as it were, quite pure as it were. It's devoid of all our intellectual constructions, all our philosophies, all our concepts. They are ours. They belong to us. They do not belong to reality. Reality knows nothing about them. Reality knows nothing about the *Abhidharma*. It knows nothing about any philosophy of ours, nothing about any system, and so on. We might even say - anthropomorphizing a little - that reality rejects all our philosophies, rejects all our systems, rejects all our thoughts. In *sunyata* there's no distinction whatsoever of conditioned and unconditioned *dharmas*, and pure *dharmas* and defiled *dharmas*. In *sunyata*, in reality, all such dualisms are transcended. So in this third great statement, that in *sunyata* no *dharmas* exist, Avalokitesvara drives home, he reinforces his previous statement and he makes it clear that reality, *sunyata*, voidness, is absolutely bare as it were, pure as it were, of all these concepts, all these philosophies, all these systematic intellectual approaches. It's just like the sky - this is a very favourite, a very famous image in Mahayana Buddhism - it's just like the sky without any cloud whatsoever. The clouds may sometimes be very beautiful, especially at sunset; you may get beautiful red clouds, golden clouds, but they obscure the naked brilliance of the sky itself. The reality, *sunyata*, in its true state, above and beyond all our thoughts about it, our systems, is just like the pure cloudless sky. So, in *sunyata* no *dharmas* exist.

Fourth statement:

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS BUDDHISM

I am paraphrasing a wee bit but this is what it comes to: there is no such thing as Buddhism. With the second of his great statements, Avalokitesvara disposed of philosophy, even Buddhist philosophy, but do you thing that Buddhism itself is going to escape? With this statement, he disposes not just of philosophy but of religion, even Buddhism. In other words, disposes of religion considered as an end in itself. He makes it clear that religion is not an absolute, not ultimate. And in this part of the sutra, Avalokitesvara addressing Sariputra enumerates various well-known categories of Buddhist thought and Buddhist religion. For instance, the five *skandhas*, the five groups, then the six sense organs, then the eighteen elements, then the twelve links, the famous twelve links of the chain of dependent origination which we see depicted in the outermost circle of the Wheel of Life, then the Four Noble Truths, then knowledge itself, then attainment itself, and even non-attainment. And Avalokitesvara declares all these categories, philosophical and religious, they are all *sunyata*, void. In other words, not ultimately valid. That is to say, perfect wisdom goes beyond Buddhism, it goes beyond even the Four Noble Truths, even beyond conditioned co-production, dependent origination, even beyond the idea of attainment or non-attainment, even beyond the idea of knowledge, beyond the idea of Enlightenment; because Buddhism itself is only a raft to take us to the other shore, it is only a finger pointing to the moon. So in this fourth great statement Avalokitesvara disposes, or perfect wisdom as it were, disposes of all the traditional religious categories, those which are the operative bases as it were of our religious life. And he says, in reality not even any Four Noble Truths, not even any attainment, not even any non-attainment, and so on. He negates, he denies all these, not only philosophical but even practical religious categories, and he says, in effect, no such thing as Buddhism; and if you want to develop, you want to realise perfect wisdom you have to go beyond Buddhism and realise that in reality there is no such thing as Buddhism.

Now at this point of course, I think some of us at least can begin to see the bearing of the Heart Sutra on Zen. If you've read only even one or two books about Zen or a few Zen stories, you'll begin to see where Zen links up with, connects with the Heart Sutra, or where the Heart Sutra rather works itself out practically in terms of Zen. You go beyond even Buddhism. You all know the story about the famous Zen master who was asked by the pupil, "Well suppose I met the Buddha one day? What should I do?" And the master says, "Kill him." In other words, go beyond the Buddha, go beyond Buddhism. There are lots of stories like that, I'm not going to bore you by repeating them, many of you know them by heart already, but you can see where the Heart

Sutra links up with Zen. The Heart Sutra says, most emphatically, in reality there's no such thing as Buddhism, if you want to get to reality you have to go beyond Buddhism. This is one of the main points of Zen itself in practical terms.

Fifth great statement (and here we're going to begin to be brief):

> THE BODHISATTVA GAINS ENLIGHTENMENT, BECOMES A BUDDHA, ONLY BY RELYING ON PERFECT WISDOM.

There's no other way. You can't become Enlightened unless you develop perfect wisdom. If you get stuck in anything else lower down, you may have many worthwhile attainments but not Enlightenment, not Buddhahood - that comes only through perfect wisdom. You may be a great scholar but that doesn't help very much. You may be deeply versed in the techniques of concentration and meditation, even that doesn't help very much. You may be very devoted, very pious, full of faith, even that doesn't help very much. You may be full of good works, very charitable, may give your life even for humanity, but even that doesn't help very much. Here there's only one thing that helps and that is perfect wisdom. It's only perfect wisdom in the sense of the knowledge of ultimate reality, face to face, directly, that will confer upon one Enlightenment, Buddhahood, above and beyond Buddhism itself.

Now, sixth and last statement:

> ALL THE BUDDHAS IN THE THREE PERIODS OF TIME GAIN ENLIGHTENMENT BY RELYING ON PERFECT WISDOM

There are no exceptions. If there are any Enlightened persons in the past, in the present, or in the future, they will have become Enlightened not in any other way but only by the development of perfect wisdom, only by knowing reality. No other way than this. And here the Heart Sutra is absolutely unambiguous, ruthlessly unambiguous we may say.

So these are Avalokitesvara's six great statements, and if we understand these we shall understand the content of the Heart Sutra.

But we haven't quite finished with the sutra. There's a further condensation at the end of the sutra. It doesn't condense the perfection of wisdom teaching quite so much as the letter 'A' does, but it condenses it considerably. At the end of the sutra we find the mantra of perfect wisdom. And just as the sutra itself condenses the *Prajnaparamita* literature so the mantra condenses the sutra itself. Conze translates *mantra* as 'spell', but that is completely misleading. A mantra is a sort of sacred word - one can't really explain it more than that.

And here, at the end of the sutra, the mantra (which is usually not translated, mantras are in fact never translated really), the mantra goes: *gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha*. Conze renders it, one can render it, like this: 'Gone, Gone, Gone beyond, Gone altogether beyond, O what an awakening, All hail !' Well as I say, this is Conze's translation. It doesn't really help us very much. It gives the bare word meaning and nothing more. But what does it <u>really</u> mean? *Gate*, the first *gate*, gone, means gone from the conditioned, gone from the phenomenal world, or if you like gone from the world, as we know it, gone, beyond it. Then *gate*, the second *gate*, the second 'gone', gone from even the unconditioned, gone even from nirvana. That is to say, from the concept of nirvana, Enlightenment, as something distinct from this world and this state - you're going beyond reality, beyond dualism. So it isn't enough to go beyond the conditioned, you've got to go beyond the unconditioned. It's not enough we may say, using Christian language, to overcome Satan, you've got to overcome God, too, otherwise you remain stuck there. So gone beyond the conditioned, gone beyond the unconditioned. And then, *paragate*, gone beyond. Gone beyond the distinction of conditioned and unconditioned, *samsara* and *nirvana*, this world and that, defiled and undefiled, and so on. Gone beyond all distinctions whatsoever.

And then, lastly, *parasamgate*, which means gone altogether beyond. And how does one do this? One goes beyond even the conception of *sunyata*, even the conception of reality. Even that eventually is left behind, and then one has gone altogether beyond.

And then what's the next word? *Bodhi*. It doesn't make any statement. *Bodhi* means Enlightenment, Awakening, knowledge of the ultimate. So the mantra doesn't say, 'Oh, and then you realise *bodhi*.' Conze

translates it, 'O what an awakening'. That's not bad but it hasn't got the force of that simple *bodhi*. The mantra merely says, go beyond the conditioned, beyond the unconditioned, go beyond even that distinction, go beyond *sunyata* itself. And then *bodhi*, Awakening, Enlightenment. And the final syllable is *svaha*. You can't translate that but the general meaning in Indian literature is 'all is well', 'auspiciousness', 'blessing' if you like. Because when you've reached that, when you've awoken, when you've become a Buddha, well all is well, there's nothing more, everything is completely auspicious, so *svaha*.

And this is what the mantra means: *gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha* - Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond, Awakening/Enlightenment, all is well. Now in the Mahayana tradition, this mantra is to be constantly recited and constantly meditated upon, so that eventually one assimilates its deep meaning. As I've said, just as the Heart Sutra itself condenses and concentrates the meaning of the entire bulk of perfection of wisdom scriptures, in the same way this mantra itself condenses the meaning of the Heart Sutra. If you like, it's the heart of the Heart Sutra, or the essence of the essence.

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Now before concluding, just a very few words more specifically about the Heart Sutra in Tibetan Buddhism and in Zen. In both these traditions, in both Tibetan Buddhism and in Zen, the perfection of wisdom tradition is the dominant one. The Tibetan approach we may say is perhaps more dialectical. Tibetan Buddhists are rather intellectual. But the Zen approach to this same tradition is more intuitive, more poetic. But both traditions, both that of Tibetan Buddhism and that of Zen, highly esteem both the Diamond and the Heart Sutras. And it is perhaps incidentally of some interest to notice that the Sanskrit text of the Heart Sutra, which for centuries had been lost in India (no copy of the Sanskrit text of the Heart Sutra, by the way, has ever been found in India), it's been found in a Japanese temple about ninety years ago, preserved in Japan. It wasn't a Zen temple, it was a temple of another sect, another school; but it was preserved, the original Indian, a palm-leaf manuscript, in this Japanese temple. And both in Tibetan Buddhism and in Zen, in fact not only in Zen but many other school of Japanese Buddhism, the Heart Sutra is constantly recited and constantly meditated upon as the essence of the essence, or the perfection of wisdom which is synonymous with Enlightenment.

In fact one of the great Zen masters, or rather Ch'an masters of China, Han-shan, has written a very beautiful commentary on the Heart Sutra as well as on the Diamond Sutra, and both of these have been translated by Charles Luk and these translations are indeed very illuminating. We may go so far as to say that the Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra, or rather the Heart Sutra together with the Diamond Sutra, constitute the spiritual backbone of Far Eastern Buddhism: the Buddhism of China, of Japan, Mongolia, Tibet, Korea, Vietnam, and so on. And it is sincerely to be hoped that Western Buddhism also will continue this tradition that here in this country too we shall learn to listen to the voice of Avalokitesvara in our own hearts, in the hope that eventually the flower of perfect wisdom will bloom.

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