



THE MEDITATIVE APPROACH TO THE HEART SUTRA

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Today, I want to share about the meditative approach to the *Heart Sutra*. The *Heart Sutra* is one of the most familiar Buddhist sutras to the Chinese people and is also a daily recitation for many Buddhists. However, our usual study of the *Heart Sutra* mostly remains at chanting or theoretical understanding, and we rarely consider its relationship with meditation. We know that the core goal of practicing Buddhism is liberation, which hinges on the realization of emptiness. The meditative approach to the *Heart Sutra* precisely guides us to directly enter into the state of emptiness. Before expounding on this topic, let me first introduce the *Heart Sutra* and its related theoretical background.

I

THE HEART SUTRA AND THE DIAMOND SUTRA

The *Heart Sutra* belongs to the Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom) class of Buddhist sutras, which hold a highly esteemed position in the tradition of Chinese Buddhism, essentially accompanying the process of Buddhist sutra translation into Chinese. As early as the Eastern Han Dynasty, these sutras were introduced to China. By the time of the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, the translator Kumarajiva had successively translated significant texts such as the *Great Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*, the *Diamond Sutra* and treatises like the *Root Verses on the Middle Way*, the *One-Hundred-Verses Treatise*,

and the *Twelve Gates Treatise*, systematically promoting the philosophy of Prajna. This period coincided with the prevalence of metaphysics, a time when the Prajnāparamita thought emphasizing emptiness and non-being resonated well with the cultural background, thus gaining widespread recognition. Later, the Tripitaka Master Xuanzang translated the 600-volume *Mahā-prajñā-parāmita-sūtra*, which stands as one of the most significant and comprehensive works in the Chinese Buddhist canon. The *Heart Sutra*, despite being only about 260 Chinese characters long, encapsulates the essence of the Prajñā thought.

Alongside the widely circulated *Heart Sutra*, another Prajñāparamita text is the *Diamond Sutra*. In terms of practice, both texts have different focuses. The *Heart Sutra*, through the right view of Prajñā, and by contemplating the Five Aggregates, the Twelve Bases, the Eighteen Elements, the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, and the Four Noble Truths, guides us to directly realize emptiness. On the other hand, the practice of emptiness as

expounded in the *Diamond Sutra* permeates the entire Bodhisattva path, including how bodhisattvas should practice giving and patience, how to adorn pure lands and benefit all beings, thus achieving an understanding of emptiness through these actions.

Therefore, the *Diamond Sutra* particularly emphasizes two ideas. The first is there is no form of self, no form of others, no form of living beings, and no form of longevity. The reason ordinary people remain such is precisely because of the attachment to the self. This leads to two outcomes when doing things: in addition to accumulating merits, one might also reinforce self-attachment, enhancing a sense of self-importance, superiority, and desire to dominate. If one's intentions deviate, the more one does and the greater the contributions made, the heavier the attachment to self becomes. This is not only true for ordinary beings but also for practitioners. In light of this, the sutra continually reminds us that, if one attaches to the forms of self, others, living beings, and longevity, one is an ordinary being; conversely, one is a bodhisattva.

These four phrases run throughout the entire sutra, and with every action, the Buddha offers us this teaching, concerned that we might fall into self-attachment and the mindset of an ordinary being.

The second point emphasized in the *Diamond Sutra* is the tripartite formula: "... is spoken of as no ... therefore, it is called..." There are two types of attachments: attachment to the self and attachment to dharmas, which refers to attachment to the actions one performs and the results of one's practice. To prevent us from falling into attachment to dharmas, the Buddha concludes each point with this formula, such as "Giving is spoken of as no giving. Therefore, it is called giving." If, in the process of practicing the Bodhisattva path, one becomes attached to the actions performed or the results of practice, it will lead to negative mental states such as opposition, anxiety, fear of gain and loss, which run counter to the aim of practice.

Then, how can we let go of attachments and avoid falling into the mindset of an ordinary being? The guidance

given by the *Diamond Sutra* is to learn to observe through the tripartite formula. For example, with the world – “The world is spoken of as no world. Therefore, it is called the world.” – It tells us that the world is merely a provisional appearance based on interdependent origination, not a truly unchanging existence. If we observe in this way, we can recognize the lack of inherent nature of the world at the moment of dependent origination. Furthermore, we can understand emptiness and achieve what the *Diamond Sutra* describes as “giving rise to a mind without dwelling anywhere.” No-dwelling is not a concept, but a state of being, a capacity. When we truly achieve a mindset that does not dwell on anything, through the right view of the Middle Way devoid of self and forms, we can handle myriad tasks without being burdened. We can “live in the world as if in the void, like a lotus flower, not clinging to water.”

The *Heart Sutra* guides us in directly realizing emptiness through the contemplation of the Five Aggregates and even the Four Noble Truths, leaning more towards

wisdom. By integrating with the *Diamond Sutra*, we know how to apply the right view of Prajna in practical conduct, guide action with insight, and practice both compassion and wisdom, so we can deepen our study and practice of the *Heart Sutra*.

II

THE DELUSION AND ENLIGHTENMENT OF LIFE

When studying sutras, it's essential to understand the title first, as it often provides a crucial summary of the text. For example, the *Sutra of the Fundamental Vows of the Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha* tells of the great vows made by the Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha in the causal stage of the practice of becoming enlightened, while the *Amitabha Sutra* introduces the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss achieved by Amitabha Buddha. The text we are currently studying, the *Heart Sutra*, is fully titled the *Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra*. When Buddhist sutras were translated from India to China, they were either translated for meaning or

phonetically. Translations for meaning were based on the content, while phonetic translations were based on the Sanskrit pronunciation. The latter was mainly used in special cases, such as when there was no equivalent concept in Chinese characters. Prajna Paramita is a phonetic translation from Sanskrit. If translated, Prajna means wisdom, and Paramita means reaching the other shore, symbolizing “reaching the other shore with great wisdom.”

Wisdom is the core of Buddhist practice, and it is through wisdom that liberation is achieved. When Siddhartha Gautama (Shakyamuni) attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, he realized that every sentient being possesses the wisdom and virtues of the Tathagata, as well as the capacity for self-liberation. This constitutes the Buddha’s greatest contribution to humanity. In contrast to Western religions, where salvation is often seen as coming from God, and humans must seek salvation through faith and prayer to God, the Buddha taught that there are no saviors in the world, not even the Buddha himself. The term “Buddha” means “the Enlightened

One,” and upon his complete awakening, he saw that every being has this potential, but it is veiled by ignorance. Therefore, through practice, this potential can be uncovered and developed.

The Dharma taught by the Buddha points us towards the path from confusion to awakening. In this sense, Buddhism is an education of awakening, with the Buddha serving as a teacher guiding us to unlock wisdom. Once wisdom is unlocked, we can break through confusion and attain enlightenment, understanding our true nature. Just as the title of this sutra indicates – reaching the other shore through great wisdom.

How to unlock wisdom? Buddhism offers 84,000 Dharma Gates, each representing a path of practice. Among these, the *Heart Sutra* and Chan Buddhism point us to the most direct path. It is known that the Sixth Patriarch Huineng of Chan Buddhism attained enlightenment upon hearing the *Diamond Sutra*, making the Prajna texts foundational sutras for Chan Buddhism.

The second chapter of the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* is titled “Prajna,” and it offers an explanation of the *Diamond Sutra*. A very important sentence at the beginning states, “The wisdom of Bodhi and Prajna is originally possessed by worldly people themselves. It is only because their minds are confused that they are unable to enlighten themselves.” This implies that all beings inherently possess the wisdom of Prajna, but it is because this wisdom is obscured that they are unable to attain enlightenment.

Where exactly does the difference in life lie? For instance, between Buddhas and sentient beings, there is a vast difference in the quality of life. However, if we were to seek the initial point of divergence, it essentially boils down to – delusion and enlightenment. So, how far apart are delusion and enlightenment? It could be as vast as the distance between heaven and earth, or as close as a single thought. The *Platform Sutra* summarizes this: “The deluded mind is that of an ordinary being; the awakened mind is that of a Buddha. The mind attached

to phenomena is afflicted; the mind detached from phenomena is enlightened.” If one moment you are in delusion, you are an ordinary being; the next moment you break through delusion and attain enlightenment, you are instantly a Buddha. This shows that the gap between a Buddha and an ordinary being is not vast, because everyone possesses the nature of awakening and the potential to become a Buddha. The difference lies only in whether one has attained enlightenment and seen the true nature.

From delusion and enlightenment, two distinct paths of life emerge. Based on delusion, one develops greed, anger, and ignorance, leading to the cycle of samsara (the cycle of birth and death) in the six realms. Based on enlightenment, one develops awakening, righteousness and purity, cultivating the qualities of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. So, what is delusion, and what is enlightenment?

In Buddhism, another term for delusion is ignorance. It's like being in a lecture hall, without light, engulfed

in darkness, one is unable to see anything. In our lives, light represents the illumination of wisdom. This is not ordinary wisdom, but innate wisdom free from defilements, which is fundamental to attaining Buddhahood. When this lamp of the heart is unlit, life wanders in the darkness, unable to see clearly oneself, the truth of the world, the principles that fate follows, or even the meaning of life itself. These issues, I refer to as the eternal perplexities of life.

Every life harbors eternal perplexities, which is why the world has philosophy and religion – to question and address these issues. Philosophy is known as the “love of wisdom,” but how does wisdom differ from knowledge? Knowledge enables us to understand the phenomena of things, while wisdom guides us to transcend phenomena and directly reach their essence. If we cannot correctly understand ourselves and the world, it means we will develop misconceptions about ourselves and the world, thereby generating afflictions. Moreover, we will view ourselves and the world through these afflictions,

further reinforcing our misconceptions and creating even more afflictions.

Therefore, the Buddha summarized the life of ordinary beings with the three words: “delusion, karma, suffering.” Delusion refers to confusion. Due to confusion, various afflictions such as greed, anger, and ignorance arise, leading to various unwholesome actions such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying. These unwholesome actions in turn lead to the suffering of samsara. Before dispelling delusion, life continues in the cycle of “delusion, karma, and suffering,” endlessly generating karma and experiencing its results, life after life, without cessation. What is more daunting is that this cycle of rebirth has formed a strong inertia, enveloping us and making us powerless to escape.

III

PRAJNA WISDOM: INHERENTLY COMPLETE

The current state of life for ordinary beings is built on the foundation of delusion and karma. Are we satisfied with this situation? Many people, despite wanting to change, see no way out, feeling helpless and even hopeless. Where is the way out? If we study the Dharma, we will discover another force within life – the potential for awakening, the inherent Prajna wisdom within our own minds. This is the fundamental key to changing our destiny.

What is Prajna wisdom, and what are its characteristics?

The “Prajna Chapter” of the *Platform Sutra* tells us: “The true mind is as vast as the void, with no boundaries. It is not square or round, nor great or small. Neither is it blue, yellow, red or white. It is not above or below, nor long or short. It is without anger or joy, without right or wrong, without good or evil, and it has no head or tail. All Buddha lands are also as vast as the void. The wondrous self-nature of ordinary beings is originally empty, and there are no dharmas to be attained. It is the same with the inherent nature, which is truly empty.” The void is infinite and formless, and the Prajna wisdom inherent within us is also like the void, infinite and formless.

Secondly, the mind has the characteristic of luminosity, akin to a mirror, reflecting everything clearly and completely without dwelling. Among the Buddha’s ten great epithets, one is called “Samyaksambuddha,” meaning “the Perfectly Enlightened One.” How does this omniscience differ from our current state of mind? Our minds exist in the form of thoughts, with each thought having a corresponding object, whether it be a thing or a person,

and is always limited. People live within such thoughts: hopping from one thought to another, or repeatedly processing a single thought, endlessly mulling over it, and eventually being controlled by that thought. In fact, behind these chaotic thoughts, there exists a mind like the void. Practice is about stepping beyond thoughts to recognize the true mind behind them. This true mind is limitless, like an infinite mirror, as vast as the universe itself. As a Chan master said, “The entire earth is but the eye of a monk.” This eye represents the function of omniscience, capable of illuminating everything without dwelling on anything.

No dwelling means being free from clinging. But the mind of ordinary beings clings, relying on corresponding objects. The extent of this stickiness, how much it clings, primarily depends on how much we care. The more you care about something, the more you cling to it, and vice versa. By studying the Prajna sutras, we realize that “Five Aggregates are all empty;” understand that “All conditioned phenomena are illusions;” and recognize that “All

conditioned phenomena are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows, like dewdrops and a lightning flash. Contemplate them thus.” And viewing the world with this perspective, we can gradually free ourselves from clinging. Then, the inherent clarity of the mind will manifest.

Furthermore, the mind has the capacity to give rise to all phenomena and encompass all things. By understanding the characteristics of the mind and developing Prajna wisdom, one gains the ability to eliminate confusion, moving from the shore of delusion to the shore of enlightenment.

IV

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE WORLDLINGS AND THE ENLIGHTENED: DELUSION OR ENLIGHTENMENT

When talking about “this shore” and “the other shore,” we think of the distance in time and space. For instance, the Western Pure Land is described as being “to the West, beyond ten trillion Buddha lands.” When practicing the Pure Land method, we vow to journey from here in the present to there in the future. This reflects the habit of ordinary beings who need a tangible place; otherwise, they feel unsettled internally.

But the Dharma teaches us that both this shore and the other shore are within our minds. When the mind is filled with confusion and afflictions, life is stuck on this shore, unable to move freely. Once confusion and afflictions are eliminated, and the forces that create barriers and suffering are removed, one is instantly on the other shore, free and autonomous, coming and going as one pleases. Such a state of life is something many people aspire to. How can one reach the other shore? The key lies in unlocking wisdom, hence it is called “Prajna Paramita.”

In Buddhism, there are two perspectives on interpreting the *Diamond Sutra*: the perspective of the Middle Way and the perspective of Chan Buddhism. The Middle Way primarily focuses on the understanding of the dualistic world – the world we currently perceive is characterized by distinctions such as subject and object, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, male and female, and the void and earth. In reality, these distinctions are merely manifestations of dependent origination and are not inherently oppositional. However, due to ordinary beings’

attachment to the self and phenomena, a dualistic opposition is formed.

The Middle Way view allows us to see clearly that all phenomena are merely false appearances arising from conditions and lack inherent nature. Recognizing the lack of inherent nature allows us to further realize the emptiness of each phenomenon in the present moment, rather than falling into the dualistic attachment to self and phenomena or succumbing to greed, anger, and ignorance. But does understanding the principle of no inherent nature equate to realizing emptiness? It's not that simple. Having knowledge of no inherent nature is not the same as experiencing the state of realizing no inherent nature. This process requires establishing the right view, and more importantly, involves meditation practice to cultivate the Prajna of contemplation, and eventually realize the Prajna of ultimate reality.

From the perspective of Chan Buddhism, the approach is "pointing directly to the true mind, seeing one's own

nature and becoming a Buddha.” The *Platform Sutra* begins with the assertion: “The self-nature of Bodhi is originally clear and pure. Simply use that mind, and you will straightaway accomplish Buddhahood.” Everyone possesses a complete awakened nature; as soon as one recognizes this nature, one can become a Buddha. As mentioned earlier, the *Platform Sutra* guides us to directly understand the wisdom of Prajna, hence it clarifies from the outset what Prajna wisdom is. Subsequent chapters, regardless of the practice – be it meditation, repentance, or taking refuge – are all based on the height of the nature of Bodhi, grounded in the highest perspective, guiding us to directly experience our true mind.

Thus, it’s evident that the Middle Way and Chan Buddhism offer different interpretations of Prajna thought. Today, we are interpreting the *Heart Sutra* primarily from the perspective of the Middle Way.

V

THE ESSENCE OF THE HEART SUTRA

By interpreting the title, we have understood what problem the *Heart Sutra* ultimately aims to address. Moving on to the text itself, the very first sentence further clarifies the essence of the sutra – how it proposes to solve the problem.

When Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara was practicing the profound Prajna Paramita, he saw that the Five Skandhas were all empty, and he crossed beyond all suffering and difficulties.

Avalokiteshvara (Guanzizai) Bodhisattva is an alternative translation of Guanyin Bodhisattva. The former was translated by Xuanzang, while the latter by Kumarajiva. This shows that the names of bodhisattvas also contain significant meanings of practice. The word “Avalokiteshvara” (Contemplate with Perfect Ease) encapsulates the essence of practice in the *Heart Sutra*. It’s common to see plaques with the phrase “Achieve Great Freedom” hanging in the main halls of temples, as attaining Buddhahood is about achieving ultimate freedom.

Modern people pursue freedom, which often refers to external conditions, such as financial independence or freedom of belief. However, the freedom in Buddhism is internal – it is liberation from confusion and afflictions, not being swayed by external changes. In any situation, one can attain the state of “not clinging to forms, abiding in suchness unmoved.” The *Avatamsaka Sutra* (*Flower Ornament Sutra*) speaks of ten kinds of freedom: freedom of life, freedom of mind, freedom of wealth, freedom of actions (karma), freedom of birth, freedom

of aspirations, freedom of faith and understanding, freedom of wish-fulfilling, freedom of wisdom, and freedom of Dharma. These represent the true depiction of a life of great freedom.

How to attain liberation? The *Heart Sutra* uses one word – observe (Guan), implying contemplation through wisdom. There are three kinds of Prajna wisdom: the Prajna of texts, the Prajna of contemplation, and the Prajna of ultimate reality. Firstly, the Prajna of texts refers to sutras and teachings that guide us to unlock the wisdom of Prajna.

Next is the Prajna of contemplation. Listening to and contemplating the teachings is meant to transform the wisdom of the Dharma into personal insight, such as the truth of the suffering of samsara, the principles of cause and effect, impermanence, and no-self, all of which are crucial right views of life. Practicing Buddhism means learning these right views to guide one's words and actions, and how one interacts with others. Furthermore,

these right views should guide meditation practice to cultivate contemplative wisdom. If the inner contemplative wisdom does not arise and one relies solely on concepts, there will be no strength to counter the habits that have been present since beginningless time. This entails the practice of the wisdom of contemplation, including both Samatha (concentration meditation) and Vipassana (observation meditation). Samatha must be developed first; otherwise, Vipassana cannot be effectively practiced. Different Buddhist sects have various requirements for Samatha. Some schools demand high levels of concentration, requiring attainment of the four meditations and eight concentrations before practicing Vipassana; while others do not require such deep concentration, as long as the mind is settled, the wisdom of observation can arise through various skillful means. Regardless of the depth, a foundation in Samatha is always necessary.

The training in Samatha meditation is not complex. The most common method is through focusing on the breath, being aware of its length, shortness, coarseness,

and subtlety; or through walking meditation, concentrating on each action of lifting and stepping; or by choosing an object of focus, such as recalling a Buddha image, a Buddha's name, or the virtues of the Three Jewels – the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Through practicing Samatha, one concentrates the mind on a single thought, allowing the flurry of thoughts to settle down. It's like a pond of turbid water: if allowed to remain still, the impurities gradually settle, clarifying the water and thus revealing what lies beneath.

The mind, like a mirror, inherently possesses the function of reflecting everything clearly and completely. However, ordinary beings are constantly disturbed by ignorance and deluded thoughts, losing the power of clarity. After subduing these deluded thoughts through Samatha meditation, the inner wisdom of observation arises, allowing us to see the arising and ceasing of thoughts without being swayed by them. This is in contrast to the current state, where we unconsciously follow each thought and habit, feeling both out of control. When

we want to let go, we find it difficult; when not wanting to become angry, we fail. Every day, we are influenced by various tasks and emotions, leaving us physically and mentally exhausted, yet lacking the ability to rest. Even with a moment of leisure, we lack the mindset to be at peace with ourselves. Just as the saying goes, “The trees wish to remain still, but the wind keeps blowing.”

Through meditation practice, as the inner wisdom of observation gradually strengthens, we gain autonomy over our thoughts and then use this wisdom to calm various emotions and afflictions. This is the process of moving towards freedom in life. As the mind becomes increasingly pure, you’ll find that whether or not you actively observe, the power of observation inherent in the mind is always there. This is the power of correct peerless enlightenment. With this, the Prajna of ultimate reality is unlocked. Abiding in this wisdom of observation, even if habits occasionally emerge or emotions arise, we won’t be significantly affected, as “The vast sky is not hindered by the drifting clouds.”

Therefore, “Guanzizai” is not only the name of a Bodhisattva but also a state of aspiration. It signifies not only personal liberation but also guiding sentient beings with compassion and wisdom towards liberation.

“When the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara was practicing the profound Prajna Paramita.” The Prajna Paramita referred to here is the Prajna of ultimate reality, the ultimate wisdom. Because he is the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, there is no need to rely on the Prajna of texts or contemplation; he can directly dwell in the Prajna of ultimate reality.

“The Five Aggregates are empty.” The Five Aggregates, consisting of form, feeling, cognition, mental formations, and consciousness, represent our current living entity. Among them, form pertains to material aspects, feeling to emotions, cognition to thoughts, mental formation to actions of will, and consciousness to the senses like sight. When the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara contemplated the Five Aggregates with the profound Prajna wisdom,

he saw that they were all empty.

Emptiness encompasses two dimensions. Firstly, we see all phenomena as false appearances arising from conditions. But ordinary beings cling to the Five Aggregates, and their physical appearance, health, etc., leading to the attachment to dharmas (phenomena). This is the ordinary beings' understanding of the Five Aggregates. However, a bodhisattva, through the wisdom of emptiness, sees life as a combination of material and mental elements, within which there is no permanent, unchanging entity. The emphasis on emptiness helps us understand that the life composed of the Five Aggregates lacks inherent existence. More importantly, we can directly realize that the phenomena of the Five Aggregates are empty in nature. Realizing the emptiness of phenomena is just the beginning; with some study of the teachings, we can grasp this concept, but this is merely an intellectual understanding of emptiness. With the wisdom of meditative observation, we can directly experience the nature of emptiness through the phenomenal emptiness. This

wisdom of observation and the emptiness attained are unified, not separate entities.

“He crossed beyond all suffering and difficulties.” When we truly see that the Five Aggregates are empty, we gain the ability to free ourselves from all worldly suffering and calamities, achieving a life of liberation and ease.

This is the guiding principle of practicing the *Heart Sutra*, offering a further interpretation of the sutra’s title: “reaching the other shore through wisdom.”

VI

THE MIDDLE WAY (MADHYAMAKA) VIEW

So, how do we acquire the wisdom of emptiness and engage in meditation on emptiness? The sutra further instructs us:

Listen, Sariputra! Form is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from form. Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form. So too are feelings, cognition, mental formations, and consciousness.

Everything we see in the universe, such as mountains, rivers, and the earth, appears to be real and tangible. How can it be empty? What about the table and the house

before our eyes? Such doubts arise because we think of emptiness and existence as dualistic opposites – existence means presence, and emptiness means absence. However, the *Heart Sutra* tells us that existence and emptiness are inseparable; seeing existence is seeing emptiness. Without this wisdom, we may form inherent views on the phenomena of existence, leading to attachment and eternal expectations. In reality, all afflictions are related to our perception.

When we examine our afflictions, we realize that each one has its own underlying basis and source, whether it stems from children, family, career, or interpersonal relationships. Why can a particular issue cause you distress? It's not the situation itself, but rather your attachment and expectations towards it. When reality does not align with your expectations, afflictions arise.

Ordinary beings tend to develop attachments to self and to dharmas in everything they encounter. Attachment to self involves forming an assumption and attachment

of self towards the physical body comprised of the Five Aggregates; attachment to dharmas involves forming incorrect assumptions and attachments towards all things. These two types of attachment are the root of all afflictions, referred to as “attachment to all-pervasive discrimination” in the Consciousness-Only sect of Buddhism. Just as someone, seeing a rope in the moonlight, mistakes it for a snake due to poor visibility and becomes frightened. A similar story is the anecdote of “the shadow of a bow mistaken for a snake in a cup.” Someone drinking at a friend’s house saw what appeared to be a snake in the cup, and thought he had ingested it. He became increasingly convinced that the snake was causing trouble inside the stomach, eventually falling ill. Upon learning this, his friend brought him back to the house again. It turned out that a bow hung on the wall of his friend’s house cast a shadow into the cup that looked like a snake. Once he understood the truth, his illness disappeared immediately. Our afflictions are similar. They are not real but stem from incorrect assumptions, imaginations, and expectations about the world, like the non-existent

snake in the cup.

Learning Buddhism is about establishing a wise and accurate understanding of the world. How should one view the world? If you ask a Christian, he might say the world was created by God. If you ask a materialist, he might believe the world came about through evolution, with a great deal of contingency involved. Buddhism neither endorses theism nor fortuitism, but proposes the principle of dependent origination and causality, meaning “All phenomena arise from causes and conditions, and all phenomena cease with the cessation of causes and conditions.” This applies universally, from the internal realm of the Five Aggregates of body and mind to the external expanse of the universe.

The *Heart Sutra* states that “Form is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from form. Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form.” This reflects an observation of form dharmas through the lens of dependent origination. The term “form” commonly refers

to colors or beauty. In Buddhism, it encompasses all material phenomena. Our understanding of materiality has two aspects: color, which is visible appearance; shape and volume, which define form. Together, visible appearance and form constitute the existence of materiality. “Form is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from form.” suggests that the phenomena of existence (being) and emptiness are not two separate entities. The latter two phrases go further, directly stating that “Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form.”

Why is it said that form is not different from emptiness? In the brief text of the *Heart Sutra*, with just over two hundred Chinese characters, three words appear especially frequently: “emptiness,” “no,” and “not.” For example, “Form is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from form. Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form,” in which the word “emptiness” is used; “not arising nor ceasing; not defiled nor pure; not increasing nor decreasing,” in which the word “not” is used; “no feeling, cognition, mental formation, or consciousness;

no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch, or dharmas; no realm of sight to no realm of consciousness,” in which the word “no” is used all the way.

These three words all signify negation. What exactly is being negated? In Buddhism, the concept of emptiness is not a denial of the existence of reality but a denial of our incorrect understanding of the world. In the process of perceiving things, we tend to add various assumptions. For example, mistaking a rope for a snake – there is no snake objectively; it is the false assumption we impose; the fright caused by the snake, which should not exist, is an unwarranted disaster. Buddhism does not deny the existence of the rope; rather, it denies the illusion of the snake we project onto the rope.

The School of Consciousness-Only presents a three-fold classification to understand the world, also known as the Three Natures: the Imaginary Nature (the nature of existence produced from attachment to all-pervasive

discrimination), the Dependent Nature (the nature of existence as arising from dependence on other things), and the Absolute Nature (the perfectly accomplished nature of reality). The Absolute Nature represents emptiness and ultimate reality, the Dependent Nature signifies the phenomena arising from dependent origination, and the Imaginary Nature reflects the ordinary beings' perception. In the Middle Way system, this comprehension of the world is summarized into two truths: the Conventional Truth (*samvrti-satya*) and the Ultimate Truth (*paramartha-satya*). The Conventional Truth represents the phenomenal world as perceived by ordinary beings, while the Ultimate Truth represents the world's true nature or ultimate reality.

When facing phenomena arising from conditions, we can develop two kinds of understanding, leading to two distinctly different paths in life. If ignorance leads us to a mistaken understanding, we enter into the state of being attached to all-pervasive discrimination, triggering confusion, afflictions, and the cycle of birth and

death. However, if we can observe with the wisdom of dependent origination, recognizing that everything is a false appearance arising from conditions and lacks inherent existence, we can realize the nature of emptiness and achieve liberation at the very moment of perceiving phenomena. The *Heart Sutra* points out the true understanding of dependent origination, telling us that existence and emptiness are not separate but two sides of the same coin.

Regarding this issue, the *Diamond Sutra* employs a tripartite formula. Take a cup for example: “A cup is spoken of as no cup. Therefore, it is called a cup.” The cup exists dependently, arising from many conditions that are not the cup itself. Without these dependent conditions, there is no inherently existing cup. However, it is not correct to say that there is no cup; the phenomenon of the cup, arising from numerous conditions, does exist, and we conventionally designate it as a “cup.” By cultivating this kind of observation, we can realize the emptiness of the cup at the moment of perceiving it, instead of falling into

attachment, emotions, and inherent views regarding the cup.

In observing the world, the Middle Way School summarizes its view with the “eight negations”: “neither arising nor ceasing, neither permanent nor annihilated, neither identical nor different, neither coming nor going.” This encapsulates the understanding that all phenomena are neither eternal nor cease to exist completely after destruction, but continue to exist in another form.

Take this cup, for example. If we perceive it as permanent, we may develop expectations of permanence. When it is lost or broken, we may experience sadness and subsequent afflictions. However, from the perspective of dependent origination, the cup’s existence is contingent upon various conditions. Without these conditions, there is no inherently existing cup that is independent and self-sustaining. Therefore, we should not develop a view of inherent existence towards the cup, nor should we develop an attachment to it. Its existence is merely a

false appearance arising from conditions; essentially, it is neither permanent nor annihilated, neither arising nor ceasing, neither identical nor different, neither coming nor going.

If the concept of “one” does not inherently exist, does “many” exist? For instance, in a room filled with numerous people and objects, does this signify the existence of “many”? The wisdom of the Middle Way teaches us that without an inherently existing “one,” there cannot be an inherently existing “many.” This is because the concept of “many” is constituted by “ones.” If an inherently existing “one” does not exist, then naturally, an inherently existing “many” does not exist either. We can apply this wisdom to observe all things, recognizing that they are merely combinations of various conditions, inherently empty, and devoid of self-nature. This understanding helps us avoid falling into the attachments of viewing things as either “one” or “many.”

The *Root Verses on the Middle Way* further teaches us:

“All dharmas are neither self-arising nor other-arising, nor co-arising, nor without causes or conditions; therefore, we know that they are inherently non-arising.” “All dharmas” here refers to all things. How do these phenomena exist? Their existence cannot be separated from their origination. For example, each of us exists because our parents gave birth to us. The same applies to tables and houses, which come into being through the combination of materials like wood and human effort. This is true for every object in our lives; its existence is contingent upon its origination. We tend to perceive these as independent, concrete existences, thereby developing inherent views about their existence.

But the ancestral masters of the Middle Way School urged us to observe: is there truly an independent and unchanging existence? The arising of all phenomena typically occurs in several ways: either they arise on their own, or they arise in relation to an “other,” or they arise through a combination of self and other, or they arise without any causes and conditions. The Middle Way

masters systematically refuted each of these methods.

Firstly, regarding self-arising, from the perspective of Buddhist wisdom, nothing possesses an inherent nature; everything exists in a web of conditional relationships. A table is not produced by a table itself, nor is a house produced by a house itself, indicating they do not arise from themselves. Then, could they arise from an “other”? In fact, “self” and “other” are relative concepts. If there is no self-arising, there can be no other-arising either. Since there is neither self-arising nor other-arising, can there be co-arising? Without a “self” and an “other,” the concept of “co” does not exist. Moreover, it is impossible for something to arise without any causes or conditions.

What the Middle Way seeks to negate here is not the existence of cause-and-effect relationships, but the inherent views we project onto phenomena. When we understand that phenomena are merely false appearances arising from conditions and do not attribute inherent nature to them, practicing this insight of non-inherent existence

will give rise to the inner wisdom of observation. By observing phenomena in this light, we can directly perceive their emptiness at the moment of observation.

Thus, the wisdom of the Middle Way serves to sweep away the fulcrums of samsara. The works of great bodhisattvas like Bodhisattva Nagarjuna's *Root Verses on the Middle Way*, *Seventy Verses on Emptiness*, and Bodhisattva Deva's *Hundred Verse Treatise* progressively sweep away these supports. Whether it pertains to phenomena in life or outcomes of practice, attachment should not arise; otherwise, it becomes a fulcrum for samsara. The Dharmadhatu (realm of reality) lacks such fulcrums, having no center or boundaries. Of course, in the process of practice, these supports are not swept away all at once but gradually. Sometimes a certain support is initially provided, but ultimately, all must be swept away.

The *Heart Sutra* offers us the right view of the Middle Way, recognizing on the one hand the false appearances of dependent origination, and on the other, the ultimate

emptiness of inherent existence. This wisdom permeates our understanding of every phenomenon. “Form is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from form. Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form.” is precisely the formula of the Middle Way for understanding the world.

The statement “So too are feelings, cognition, mental formations, and consciousness.” is a succinct way of expressing the principle. If elaborated fully, it would be expressed as “Feeling is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from feeling; feeling is emptiness, and emptiness is feeling. Cognition is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from cognition; cognition is emptiness, and emptiness is cognition...” Because the principle is the same for each, it is summarized with “So too are ...”

The practice of the Sravakayana following the path of liberation fundamentally involves the Thirty-Seven Aids to Enlightenment, among which the Four Applications of

Mindfulness are essential, namely: “The body is impure, the feeling is suffering, the mind is impermanent, and there is no self in all phenomena.” This approach should also be applied to observing feeling, cognition, mental formation, and consciousness within the Five Aggregates. Many people cling to the sensations experienced during meditation, becoming overly concerned with their experiences, and fluctuating between gain and loss. If the feeling is pleasant, they rejoice; if unpleasant, they become despondent. However, any feeling, whether painful or wonderful, once clung to, can seize us, hinder the progress of meditation, and obstruct our realization of emptiness. The same observation should be made for cognition, mental formation, and consciousness, to recognize their impermanence and no-self nature. Through this, we can experience the emptiness of feeling, cognition, mental formation, and consciousness in the present moment.

When these feelings and thoughts are seen through, you will realize that they are unattainable. Essentially,

meditation primarily involves finding the correct method and then continuously and steadily applying diligence. As for temporary feelings, better or worse, there's no need to overly concern yourself. This is because the mental world is born of dependent origination, where various factors come into play. Of course, with the improvement of meditation practice, the mind will become increasingly stable.

VII

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EMPTINESS

Listen, Sariputra! All dharmas are empty: they are not arising nor ceasing; not defiled nor pure; not increasing nor decreasing.

After observing the Five Aggregates, we should further realize the nature of emptiness. What exactly is emptiness? It is characterized by not arising nor ceasing; not defiled nor pure; not increasing nor decreasing.

This can be understood from two levels. In the world of dualistic opposition, arising and ceasing, defilement and

purity, increase and decrease all seem very real. However, from the perspective of no inherent nature, the arising and ceasing of all phenomena are merely false appearances arising from conditions. They are not inherently arising or ceasing. The so-called arising and ceasing, defilement and purity, increase and decrease are just relative false appearances, varying according to individual standards. There is no absolute arising or ceasing, nor increase or decrease.

By observing arising and ceasing, purity and defilement, and increase and decrease with the wisdom of dependent origination, and not falling into the trap of inherent existence, we no longer generate afflictions, thereby maintaining a pure mind. With this pure mind, in the midst of arising and ceasing, purity and defilement, and increase and decrease, you can experience the state of not arising nor ceasing, not defiled nor pure, not increasing nor decreasing. Observing the world with this perspective is like watching clouds change from the viewpoint of the void; you won't feel that any cloud must look a certain

way or remain unchanging. It's only when we fall into the trap of believing in inherent existence that we think this is good and that is bad, leading to the attachment to arising and ceasing, purity and defilement, and increase and decrease. When we experience a mind as vast as the void, we no longer cling to changes in existence. This is a way to help us directly understand the characteristics of emptiness.

Everyone's afflictions are different, and the causes and conditions leading to these afflictions vary as well. Without wisdom, facing any phenomenon can lead to incorrect assumptions and attachments, which in turn give rise to afflictions. The meditative practice proposed by the *Heart Sutra* helps us observe all aspects of life and spiritual practice with wisdom, enabling us to realize the emptiness characterized by “not arising nor ceasing, not defiled nor pure, not increasing nor decreasing.”

VIII

MEDITATING THE WORLD, LIFE, AND DEATH

Therefore, in emptiness there is no form, feeling, cognition, mental formation, or consciousness; no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch, or dharmas; no realm of sight to no realm of consciousness.

In Buddhist teachings, observation of worldly phenomena typically involves three methods: the Five Aggregates, the Twelve Sense Bases, and the Eighteen Elements. “No form, feeling, cognition, mental formation, and consciousness” corresponds to the observation of the Five

Aggregates; “No eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch, and dharmas” corresponds to the observation of the Twelve Sense Bases; “No realm of sight to no realm of consciousness” corresponds to the observation of the Eighteen Elements.

Having analyzed the Five Aggregates earlier, let’s delve into the understanding of the Twelve Sense Bases and the Eighteen Elements. Our cognition is divided into the subjects and objects of cognition, that is, the ability to perceive the world and the world to be perceived. The subjects of cognition are the Six Internal Bases or six sense organs: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind; the objects of cognition are the Six External Bases: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and idea. Together, the Six Internal Bases and Six External Bases constitute the Twelve Sense Bases. When the sense organs come into contact with their respective sense objects, six types of consciousness arise: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness,

and mind consciousness. The six senses, six objects, and six consciousnesses together constitute the Eighteen Elements. We perceive the world based on our subjects of cognition. For instance, we perceive a visual world because we have eyes, similarly, our perception of the world through the other sense organs follows suit. Thus, the world we have largely depends on our own cognition.

If this cognition is mistaken, it leads to afflictions. Some afflictions arise from emotions, some from family, some from career, and some from interpersonal relationships... The root cause of these afflictions lies in attachment and mistaken cognition. Therefore, we should learn to use the formula of the *Heart Sutra* to observe and recognize the true nature of emotions, family, and career. For example, with family: family is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from family; family is emptiness, and emptiness is family. Similarly, for emotions: emotions are not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from emotions; emotions are emptiness, and emptiness is emotions. And for career:

career is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from career; career is emptiness, and emptiness is career. After learning the correct observation of the Prajna wisdom, we should apply it to our lives and observe everything in this way.

When we can understand in this way, facing each thing, we won't fall into incorrect assumptions, into clinging, afflictions, or anxiety. Instead, we see that these phenomena are like dreams and illusions, instantly perceiving the ultimate reality and realizing emptiness. Thus, the family can become a place of practice, work can become a place of practice, and anything can be a channel to realize emptiness. Emptiness is omnipresent with every finite moment containing the infinite.

There is no ignorance or ending of ignorance, up to and including no old age and death or ending of old age and death.

This is the observation of life and death. Many people

today experience death anxiety. Why is this? It's because we perceive life and death as very concrete realities, leading to the formation of inherent views about the phenomena of life and death. Believing that death signifies the end of everything, we cling to life and fear death.

The Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree through the observation of the cycle of birth and death. Life, like a river, follows the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination: ignorance, formations, consciousness, name and form, six sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, and old age and death, cycling endlessly. These are the twelve links of samsara, where sentient beings create karma due to ignorance, and by the force of karma, consciousness is propelled to take rebirth, constituting name and form. The six sense bases are our windows to see the world; upon contact with external objects, they give rise to various feelings, leading to craving, grasping, becoming, and thus to the continuation of birth and death.

In this process, we tend to develop inherent views and attachments at each link. Now, we need to learn to observe each link with the wisdom of emptiness. Whether it's ignorance, formations, consciousness, or even birth and death, all are devoid of inherent existence and are merely false appearances arising from conditions. Ignorance, in essence, does not exist; Formations, fundamentally, do not exist; Consciousness, fundamentally, does not exist. The non-existence mentioned here is in terms of inherent nature. But on the level of dependent origination, from ignorance to old age and death, every link exists.

If we can understand that each link forming the cycle of birth and death is a false appearance arising from conditions, and by wisely observing them, we can experience the nature of emptiness, which is neither arising nor ceasing, at the moment of observation, thereby transcending birth and death within the cycle itself. When we come to experience the nature of emptiness, which is neither arising nor ceasing, would we still fear death?

This is a meditation on the emptiness of the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, hence “There is no ignorance or ending of ignorance, up to and including no old age and death, or ending of old age and death.” Ignorance, old age and death encapsulate the entire cycle of the Twelve Links. From ignorance to old age and death is the realm of ordinary beings; eradicating ignorance to be liberated from birth and death represents the realm of Sravakayana. However, from the perspective of the Middle Way, there is inherently no such thing as ignorance, nor is there such a thing as birth and death. In ultimate reality, both ignorance and birth and death are devoid of inherent existence; instead, they are empty in nature. With the wisdom of emptiness, we see that there is no so-called ignorance to eliminate nor a process of eliminating ignorance. If it inherently does not exist, what is there to eliminate? Similarly, we discover that in emptiness, there inherently is no birth and death; what is there to fear or be anxious about?

There is no suffering, no accumulation, no cessation,

and no path.

The Four Noble Truths, consisting of suffering, accumulation, cessation, and path, are a fundamental doctrine in Buddhism. All teachings in Buddhism reveal two main points: the causality of samsara and the causality of liberation. Suffering and accumulation represent the causality of samsara. Suffering symbolizes the current state of life, while accumulation refers to the causes of suffering. Cessation and path represent the causality of liberation. Cessation symbolizes nirvana, the result of practice, while path refers to all practices leading to liberation, epitomized by the Noble Eightfold Path.

Currently, we perceive suffering as genuinely existent and afflictions as truly real, leading to anxiety and pain. Consequently, we cling to the practice, aspiring for nirvana. However, when observing through the wisdom of emptiness, we realize that the essence of suffering and accumulation is also emptiness, allowing us to realize nirvana in the moment of seeing through suffering and

accumulation. Therefore, from the perspective of emptiness, fundamentally there are no Four Noble Truths of suffering, accumulation, cessation, and path. The Four Noble Truths are also false appearances, arising from dependent origination, not inherent, unchanging entities.

Through such contemplation, we come to realize that samsara and liberation are essentially the same. Thus, we cease to create opposition between them, no longer repulsed by life and death or the cycle of existence. By seeing through the nature of samsara, we can achieve liberation in the present moment.

IX

A LIFE OF LIBERATION AND FREEDOM

There is no wisdom and no attainment.

Through the contemplation of emptiness, we understand that the world lacks inherent existence and is unattainable, and so is the mind that observes. From this, we truly experience the wisdom of having nothing to attain. This wisdom transcends duality, devoid of both subject and object. After this series of observations, returning to the beginning – what state will life present after we realize the Prajna wisdom that “There is no wisdom and no attainment”?

As there is no attainment, bodhisattvas who practice the prajnaparamita 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 now.

A life of liberation and freedom is desired by everyone. Ordinary beings, due to their attachment to the self, family, relationships, status, and fame, are constantly burdened with concerns. These attachments lead to negative mental states, such as anxiety, fear, and a sense of insecurity, etc. Every day, they are plagued by these thoughts, swinging between hope and fear, carrying a heavy psychological burden.

Why do we have attachments? It's because we have a mind that clings, we further attach ourselves to the objects of our attachments. Only with the wisdom of emptiness, which is characterized by non-attainment, can we realize that both the mind that clings to and the objects of attachment are essentially empty. When we no longer

cling, we will not fear or be anxious, nor will we indulge in delusional dreams, truly realizing the ultimate nirvana. Nirvana is not equivalent to death; instead, it signifies the complete cessation of confusion and afflictions in life, unveiling the inner awakened nature. This represents a desirable state of life characterized by freedom and ethereality.

By practicing the Prajna Paramita, all Buddhas of the past, present, and future are capable of attaining Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi (Supreme Perfect Enlightenment).

Unveiling the wisdom of Prajna is not only a necessity for ordinary beings. The Buddha told us that all Buddhas of the past, present, and future follow this path towards enlightenment. Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi, or supreme perfect enlightenment, signifies the highest form of awakening, with no higher state beyond it. “Supreme” indicates that there is nothing superior, and “perfect enlightenment” refers to the ultimate awakening. This represents

the highest realization and wisdom achieved by all Buddhas.

Therefore, know that the Prajna Paramita is a Great Spiritual Mantra, a Great Bright Mantra, a Supreme Mantra, an Unequalled Mantra. It can remove all suffering; it is genuine and not false.

This passage is like an advertisement. After elaborating on the excellence of Prajna wisdom and the method of practice, it then emphasizes the importance of this teaching. The Great Spiritual Mantra indicates the incomparable power of Prajna wisdom, capable of completely eliminating all confusion and afflictions, offering salvation and freedom to all beings while also aiding them. The Great Bright Mantra signifies that the teachings of Prajna can lead us to unlock the light of wisdom. The Supreme Mantra refers to the highest teaching. The Unequalled Mantra signifies the ultimate and unique teaching. This is not only referring to the *Heart Sutra* but also includes all practices that can lead us to awaken wisdom and

achieve enlightenment.

This is not false advertising or an exaggeration. When we unlock the wisdom of Prajna, we can indeed fundamentally resolve confusion and afflictions, freeing ourselves from all suffering in life. How do we know it's true and not deceptive? Because all Buddhas of the three times and ancestral masters have practiced in this way, following this path from delusion to enlightenment.

A mantra of Prajna Paramita should therefore be proclaimed: Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha!

The sutra concludes with a mantra, which is generally not translated. If translated simply, "Gate, Gate, Paragate" is the Buddha's encouragement for us: "Go, go, go beyond, to the other shore free from confusion and afflictions." "Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha" means let us all go together, not alone. This embodies the Mahayana Buddhist aspiration. We should cultivate the bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment, benefiting all sentient beings, leading them

towards the highest awakening, towards the shore of liberation and freedom.

Although the *Heart Sutra* is very short in length, its content is rich in meaning and filled with profound wisdom, making it a powerful tool for realizing emptiness. Therefore, studying this sutra is not merely about reciting it but about gaining the perspective of the Middle Way. This perspective should then guide one's meditation practice, illuminating the emptiness of the Five Aggregates, the Twelve Sense Bases, the Eighteen Elements, the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, the Four Noble Truths, and all phenomena.

The theme of this event is meditation, and the conditions for it are exceptionally auspicious. I usually do not cover as much content on meditation as today when interpreting the *Heart Sutra*. This session has been a somewhat special sharing, and I hope it is helpful to everyone.