

Living with the Texts: The Heart Sutra

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Today we come back to our series of close readings of sacred texts.
And you may well be wondering,
why talk about a Buddhist scripture so close to Christmas?

Let me tell you two reasons
why I love that we are looking at a Buddhist text today.
The first is theological; it's about how different religious ideas
connect together.
At the heart of Christianity
is a story about the divine embodied in human form,
the Word made flesh, in the life of one man,
a human being named Jesus.
Over the years most Christians have believed Jesus was unique,
filled with the divine in a way that you and I could never be.
But our Unitarian Universalist tradition
draws on another strand of Christianity that says,
of *course* Jesus was special, but what he was, others can become also.
Jesus showed us what is possible.
He pointed the way for us to follow him,
just as in the Buddhist traditions
the Buddha is a model for us, not a god—
a human being who pointed the way
to enlightenment, joy, and peace.



I love the photo on your order of service today,
the little baby boy touching the face of the golden Buddha statue.
In my imagination this could be the little baby Jesus
honoring the Buddha and whispering,
Yes, I know, I know...

Plus, something happened this week
that confirmed in a most delightful and surprising way
that a Buddhist text was absolutely the right choice
for today. I showed you the Buddhist mala beads
that someone gave me recently.
What I didn't mention was, not only was this gift a complete surprise,
the person who gave it to me didn't know what it was.
They thought it was a lovely piece of jewelry, which it surely is also,
and it was just by chance that I happened to know
this was a Buddhist rosary.
We counted the beads right there—five, ten, twenty—
and sure enough, 108 beads!
It was a marvelous surprise that felt like a blessing from the universe
on our service today.

So, with that possibly celestial benediction,

let's move on to our text for the day: the Heart Sutra.
The text in its entirety is printed as an insert in your order of service,
and I invite you to follow along with me.
First off, you might be wondering, what's a sutra?
In the Buddhist context, a sutra is a text supposedly records
some of the words and teachings of the historical Buddha.
The Buddha is thought to have said it during his life.
From a scholarly perspective, we can't really be sure the Buddha
actually said these words. It's kind of like the tradition that says
Moses wrote the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures.
Probably the actual author or authors lived at some later time.
Some scholars think this particular sutra was actually written in China
in the fifth century. We don't really know.
Personally, it doesn't matter too much to me who wrote it.
In our Unitarian Universalist tradition we worry less
about whether we can document the historical accuracy of a text,
and more about questions like, is it true?
and, does it help me live a better life?
You can be the judge of that
after you've had some time to sit with this text.

So we begin reading:

The Heart Sutra.

This is actually the short title.

The longer title in Sanskrit is,
the *Maha Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra*:

Maha, great or large;

Prajna, wisdom or understanding;

Paramita, perfection or transcendence;

Hridaya, heart or essence.

So in English we could translate the title as,
"The Heart of Perfect Understanding."

This is one of the most important scriptures
in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition.

Buddhists from countries like China, Japan, Tibet, and Vietnam recite this text and use it in meditation because they believe it expresses a profound truth about the nature of reality.

There are a few technical terms that I'll need to explain as we go, but if we can just get past those few barriers, there is just a wealth of insight here for us. So let's continue with the text:

**The Bodhisattva Avalokita,
while moving in the deep course of Perfect Understanding,
shed light on the Five Skandhas and found them equally empty.
After this penetration, he overcame ill-being.**

We have lots of words here that may be unfamiliar, but don't worry, we'll get it. Let me do some background explaining. First the word *Bodhisattva*. In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, a bodhisattva is a person who has become enlightened, someone who has come to see reality as it truly is.

The Buddha taught that a person who becomes enlightened gets to step off the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth and merge into the pure bliss-consciousness of nirvana—kind of like “going to Heaven,” except you don't go to be *with* God, you sort of dissolve *into* the whole.

When you become fully enlightened you can choose to cross over into this state of limitless bliss and being. But the bodhisattva is someone who is so filled with compassion, they voluntarily choose to stay behind and help other beings reach enlightenment. Like our Universalist ancestors who said they wanted no part of a Heaven that didn't welcome everyone, the bodhisattvas vow not to cross over into nirvana until every being gets there too.

And *Avalokita*, short for *Avalokiteshvara*, is the most famous bodhisattva there is.

Avalokita is known by many different names. In some countries

he is male; in others, she is female and goes by the name of Guan Yin in China, Kannon in Japan, Tara in Tibet—the goddess of infinite compassion, very like the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholicism.

So this text is a story, which tradition tells us the Buddha told, a story about Avalokita, this bodhisattva filled with compassion for the sufferings of the world.

Avalokita is meditating, “moving in the deep course of Perfect Understanding” or *prajnaparamita*.

He’s in a state of very deep concentration and insight that I can’t describe to you in words because it’s indescribable, completely beyond words, but it’s like a leaping into truth, a profound seeing, total clarity and total compassion.

The text says, in this state he examined the *Five Skandhas*.

This is our next vocabulary word.

In Buddhist philosophy, a human being, a person like you or me, is made up of five *skandhas* or “heaps”:

our physical body,

our emotions,

our sensory perceptions—what we see or taste or touch or hear—

our thoughts and memories,

and the basic awareness,

the consciousness that comes with being alive.

Body, emotions, perceptions, thoughts, consciousness:

these are the Five Skandhas; this is what a person is.

The sutra says, Avalokita looked into these five parts of a person and found that they were *empty*.

This word “empty” is *the* most important word in this whole text.

Our English word *empty* is a translation for the Sanskrit word *shunyata*.

And it’s actually not that great a translation,

so it tends to mislead us.

The Korean Buddhist scholar Mu Soeng suggests a better translation for this word *shunyata* would be “momentariness” or “transitoriness.”¹

Intellectually, the idea is something like this:

yes, things do exist in the world; we ourselves exist for a time—
but there is nothing permanent about any of it;
everything is made up of flowing, changing energy;
things come into existence, they grow, they remain for a time;
eventually they decay and disintegrate and re-form as something else.

The sutra says people have this nature too—
none of us exists as a permanent essence, unchanging over time.
What I call “myself” is constantly changing,
millions of cells in this body being born and dying every day.
All of us exist for a while, we change, we cease to be.
This is what life is.

Mu Soeng, the Korean teacher, tells us: look at quantum physics.
We once thought the universe was made up of particles of matter,
things that were solid and permanent.
Now we are discovering that the basic building blocks of the universe
aren’t really blocks at all—
they’re energy, manifesting in different ways,
sometimes as waves, sometimes particles,
ceaselessly flowing, constantly changing.
On the subatomic level, “there are no objects, only processes.”²
So how can anything be said to exist
except for the briefest of moments?

This is what Avalokita grasped.
He saw through all the things of this world,
which appear to be so solid—even his own body—
and tasted the truth of *shunyata*—the momentariness of all things.

¹ Mu Soeng, *The Heart of the Universe: Exploring the Heart Sutra* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010), p. 42.

² Soeng, p. 39.

And some say he saw beyond even this truth
to a glowing vibrancy that cannot be described, only felt:
emptiness is not nothingness, but Being itself,
absolute Being, beyond all manifestation.

In this radiant awareness,
he overcame ill-being—
all the suffering caused by our false perceptions.

So he teaches his student Shariputra:

**“Listen, Shariputra,
form is emptiness and emptiness is form.
Form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form.
The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and
consciousness.**

Our form—our body—is empty of permanence or independence.
Our body is here for a moment and passes away.
It’s a form that comes into being, exists, and dissolves,
like an image in a kaleidoscope,
there for a moment,
another pattern already rising up to take its place.

**“Listen, Shariputra, [he says,]
all dharmas are marked with emptiness.**

Here the word *dharma* means a thing—a person, a tree,
a mountain.³

They are neither produced nor destroyed,

The Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh teaches about
how foolish it is to think of ourselves

³ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2009), p. 17.

as having a beginning and an end, being born and dying.⁴

Everything that exists in this moment—

you, me, everything in the entire universe—

exists because a million other things have existed

and contributed to our being here right now.

How could we be without our parents, our grandparents,
their parents?

How could we be without sun and rain, earth and sea and sky?

How could we be without everything else?

We are not separate; we are part of this dancing energy
that creates and uncreates endlessly.

What we call our birth is merely the moment
this body emerged into the world.

What we call our death is merely the moment
this body ceases to hold life.

**They are neither produced nor destroyed,
neither defiled nor immaculate,**

This is counter-intuitive, maybe,
but it's like what the poet Rumi means when he says,

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.⁵

...neither increasing nor decreasing.

Everything is flow and change; nothing is solid.

Avalokita continues to speak:

**Therefore, in emptiness there is neither form, nor feelings, nor
perceptions,
nor mental formations, nor consciousness.**

⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, pp. 17–19.

⁵ Rumi, trans. Coleman Banks.

No eye, or ear, or nose, or tongue, or body, or mind.
No form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind.
No realms of elements (from eyes to mind-consciousness),
no interdependent origins and no extinction of them
(from ignorance to death and decay).
No ill-being, no cause of ill-being, no end of ill-being, and no path.
No understanding and no attainment.

This is counter-intuitive.

When I first heard this text I was enchanted and confused also
by this idea of “no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue...”

What does that mean?

Two aspects are important here.

One is that, when the text was first written, it was arguing against
a different school of Buddhist philosophy
which was very into making lists of categories

like *eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind...*

and going into huge amounts of detail
about the qualities of each category.

This text was trying to sweep that all away and say,

Look! Everything is temporary,

nothing exists on its own, independent from everything else—
all this thinking in categories

does not help us touch the truth of *shunyata*,

emptiness, momentariness,

the endless flow of energy in and out of forms.

So, in one sense, this text is talking to another text;

it's responding to a conversation that's already underway,

which is why it's hard for us to jump in now.

But in another sense, I experience the text—

No eye, or ear, or nose, or tongue, or body, or mind....

No understanding and no attainment—

as a call to break through everything we think we know—
it's pushing us to let go of our intellects,
our wish to understand everything rationally,
pushing us farther and farther into a numinous mental space
of holding and not holding,
understanding and not understanding,
seeking and not seeking,
dwelling in pure being,
suspended, active, alert, waiting, present.
Nobody can teach us this.
Nobody can explain it to us.
But the text is pushing us to seek, to open,
to flower into that place of awareness which the Buddha called
enlightenment.

**“Because there is no attainment,
the Bodhisattvas, grounded in Perfect Understanding,
find no obstacles for their minds.
Having no obstacles, they overcome fear,
liberating themselves forever from illusion, realizing perfect Nirvana.
All Buddhas in the past, present, and future,
thanks to this Perfect Understanding,
arrive at full, right, and universal Enlightenment.**

**“Therefore, one should know that Perfect Understanding is the highest
mantra, the unequalled mantra,
the destroyer of ill-being, the incorruptible truth.
A mantra of Prajñāparamita should therefore be proclaimed:
Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.”**
*(Gone, gone, gone all the way over, everyone gone to the other shore, enlightenment,
hurrah!)*

Buddhists all over the world recite this mantra.
Some of you know Ted Cetto, the leader of the Stockton Zen Sangha
and a music professor at the University of the Pacific.
Ted has set it to music, to a very old Christian chant tune:

Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.

The image here is crossing over a river—
this is an image that appears constantly in Mahayana Buddhism,
using the teachings as a raft
to carry you over the river,
the waves of desire and false perceptions that rise up within us,
to carry you over that river
to the shore of enlightenment beyond.
The mantra is like a promise:
everyone crossing completely over to enlightenment,
praise and hallelujah and hurrah!

And as we come to the end of our time together this morning,
I want to lift up the deep delight I feel
in this image of crossing over,
and how deeply connected it is to the Christian tradition
that we celebrate this season,
the home-place of so many of our ancestors in faith.
Because have we not also, for many generations,
sung of crossing over that river?
Deep river, we sing, my home is over Jordan.
Deep river, I want to cross over into that promised land of peace.

Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.

Amen.

Let us end with a hymn from this beautiful tradition
of African-American song
a stunning affirmation from a Christian perspective
of that place of peace and joy and serenity
to which the Buddha pointed,
which the great teachers promise us we will all reach, by and by.
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!