

The Heart of Perfect Wisdom— Lecture on The Heart of Prajñā Pāramitā Sutra (part 2)

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Translation of Sanskrit Words

When Buddhism came to China about two thousand years ago, the Indian Buddhist masters cooperated with the Chinese masters and set up some rules on translation. They were meticulous about the translation process. One of the rules is that if the word has multiple meanings then it should not be translated because if we translate it one way we lose its other meanings. Another rule is that if the Sanskrit word doesn't have a corresponding concept in Chinese, then it is not translated. Prajñā, nirvana, and skandha are Sanskrit words. Skandha has multiple meanings. There is no corresponding word to explain prajñā or nirvana either in Chinese, or in English. Does anyone know what nirvana is? Well, some 6th grader knows! Last week when I was invited to an intermediate school to introduce Buddhism, I asked, "What is nirvana?" One child said, "I know, it's a rock band!" Another child raised his hand and said, "nirvana is ultimate peace." I was really surprised. That is a really good way to describe nirvana – ultimate peace.

The Five Skandhas

Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, while deeply immersed in prajñā pāramitā, clearly perceived the empty nature of the five skandhas, and transcended all suffering.

Skandha is a Sanskrit word and it means aggregate. Aggregate is an assembly of things. It also can mean covering up something. The five skandhas are: form, feeling, conception, volition, and consciousness (In Chinese: 色受想行識). The Heart Sutra states, "form is emptiness, emptiness is form, so it is with feeling, conception, volition, and consciousness." These five skandhas make up your body and mind. If you analyze your body and mind, you will find the five skandhas.

Form means your body, your physical body. Feeling, conception, volition, and consciousness are different aspects of your mind.

Feeling. When you feel hot, you feel cold, you feel pain in your legs when you meditate, you feel good when you sleep in your bed, you feel bad, you feel lousy, these are all feelings.

Conception. When your eyes perceive the external world, or your ears hear external sounds, they leave an impression on you. Then you conceptualize them. When you see me, what goes on

in your mind? A Dharma master, a monk. That is a concept, an idea that you have isn't it? See how fast your mind works. As soon as you experience something, you conceptualize. It happens so quickly that people mistake the concept as the real experience. When we see someone, we'll say this is a woman, or this is a man; we conceptualize immediately. From perception to conceptualization, it's a very rapid process. What's faster than lightning? Or speedier than a bullet? It is the mind. Concepts are not reality. We have to understand that. Concepts are something that our minds made up. The Chinese word for this is "xiang" (想). This character is composed of two parts, the first part, 相, is an image, and the second part, 心, is mind. So it is an image in your mind. Now an image in your mind is not the same as the original thing, is it? It is a model in your mind. It is a concept, an idea. This is a key point. One of our deepest delusions is that we perceive the world through our layers of concepts instead of directly experiencing it.

When you see a woman or a man, you may say that she is pretty, or that he is handsome or ugly. When you say this, you are making judgments. But are people inherently beautiful? Can someone define beauty? Does Miss America set the standard of beauty? No, because beauty is in the eye of the beholder. What Chinese people consider beautiful, Westerners might not and what Westerners consider beautiful, Chinese people might not. And that's perfectly all right. If we don't realize this then we will argue on and on about who is more beautiful. In the same way we argue about many other things, which is silly. Sometimes there is no right or wrong. You may think that your wife is the most beautiful woman in the world, someone else may think that his wife is the most beautiful woman in the world, and both can be right. That's perfectly all right because these are conceptions, ideas, images that you form in your mind. *Both people can be right and they still can disagree.* We have to understand that. We have to jump out of the dualistic thinking that if something is right then the opposite is wrong. It's not that if one is on the side of justice then the other must be on the side of evil. Reality is not like that. Reality is not dualistic. Right and wrong, good and evil, like and dislike, these are relative concepts. They are dependent on the person that perceives and judges, dependent on the culture and the environment, and if people don't understand this, then they will have conflicts. So, that's what it means when the five skandhas are empty, empty of any inherent, absolute characteristics. What you perceive, you can say it's right, but that's only with respect to you. It may be different for others. You may even change your mind later. And often our conception is simply wrong, even deadly wrong. So conception is empty.

Volition means will, your will to do something. You want to do something and when you have that will, it is because of your feelings, your perception, and your conception by which you come to like something or dislike something. You want to get more of the things you like. I want to do this! That is a will that is generated by your mind. A will to perform some action. So everything in this world is built by our mind, by our consciousness, by our will, by our volition. This lecture room—where did it come from? It came from someone who wanted to build a lecture hall. That is will – volition. Everything we do in the world, and every goal we want to achieve comes from volition. Volition may be appropriate or it may not be appropriate. If we think what we want to do is always right, then we are in trouble and people around us will be in trouble. Then we will get into conflicts. We have to understand that people have different ideas and different wills and sometimes we might have to compromise. That is reality.

Consciousness. This is the ability to perceive, the ability to judge, to distinguish, to be

aware, to make judgments. So volition is part of consciousness. Conception is part of consciousness. Feeling is part of consciousness. Even your body, the *form*, is part of consciousness. Did you hear me? In Buddhism, mind and body are not separate things. They are not dualistic or opposites. They are not two different things. Many scientists believe that when you die, when the body disintegrates, there is nothing left and your mind goes away, that your mind is a by-product of the physical body. That is wrong. It is not your experience. That is speculation. Some people believe that the body is part of your mind. That is closer to the truth, but it is not perfectly correct either.

Understanding Emptiness

Take the example of water and ice. Can you say ice is water or water is ice? Which is the original state? Some people might think water is the original state, but that is only because we humans survive in the temperature range where this “thing” is in the form of water. If there were living beings on Mars then they would be living at below zero temperatures and they might think that the normal state is ice and that water is too hot. So which one is the “original” state of water? You can’t really say what it is, so water is empty. Emptiness doesn’t mean that there is nothing. Emptiness means that any characteristic is conditional and impermanent. It means that things do not inherently possess any characteristic. So if you think that this person is beautiful, that is not part of that person’s inherent quality because another person might think that this person is ugly.

If you can understand emptiness, you will be able to accept different points of view. You will be able to open up your mind and approach things in many ways. People perceive things differently and that is all right because the object of our perception is empty. So someone in school who always takes advantage of other students, who always beats up other kids, may be considered to be a bad boy. “Bad boy” is a quality. It is not inherent in that person. He could change. Is there anyone here who was a bad boy in school, who ran away from school and became a good citizen? People can change. That is emptiness. You are empty. Everything about you can change. You can go from ugly to beautiful if you undergo a lot of plastic surgery. That’s what some people think. But other people may think that inner beauty is more important, that having a beautiful mind is more important. When you have a beautiful mind and you are kind, then you will have a lot of friends.

So you can change. Your name can change. You can change your clothes, you can change your weight, you can change your personality, you can change just about anything about you. In this life you are a human being and in the next life you might not be a human being. It depends on what you do now. If you observe the five precepts: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, and no intoxication then you are guaranteed to become a human being again in the next life. If you violate all five of these precepts, then you are guaranteed not to return as a human being. You are guaranteed to fall into one of the suffering realms, as an animal or as a ghost or in hell. That is causality. So you are empty. That is very important. That is the key to liberation. If you understand that the five skandhas are empty, then you can change your form (your body). You change according to conditions. If you eat five cheeseburgers a day you will definitely change your body. If you go on a vegetarian diet, eat two meals a day and forgo dinner, you will become slim. It’s up to you.

There are some things that are very difficult to change. Some people carry over traits or behavior patterns from previous lives. But your will is stronger than your habits, so you should have faith in yourself. If you work hard enough, you can change just about everything, even the composition of your physical body. We are in the Realm of Desire. If you practice meditation, as you reach the first dhyana stage, your physical body will change to that of the Realm of Form. That is why when people practice meditation for long periods of time, they will experience certain sensations in the body such as heat, cold, heaviness, lightness, and so on. We have talked about this in the level II Zen Buddhism classes. When you experience these sensations, do not be afraid, do not feel strange about the transformations in your body.

My master, Grand Master Wei Chueh, is 73 years old. He has more endurance than all of us. He can go for days without sleeping. We have some seventy Zen centers in Taiwan; there is always something important that requires his attention, and he travels all over Taiwan. This could go on for a whole week and his only sleeping time would be in the car traveling between north and south. He has an attendant in the north and an attendant in the center of Taiwan because no one can keep up with his schedule. At first I couldn't understand how a person in his seventies could do that. Then I realized that it must be his deep samadhi, his deep meditation practice. He can fall into a deep sleep within seconds. When he is asleep, his face is like that of a baby. Have you ever seen babies sleep? They are so relaxed, without a worry in the world; they let go and forget so quickly. When you see the Grand Master sleep, he is like that, so innocent and peaceful, just like a baby. But he can wake up in an instant and then he is fully recharged, in a car or elsewhere. When you have deep meditation skills, you will not need that much sleep. Actually, with great samadhi, you can even go beyond the Realm of Form, eliminate your physical body, and attain the Realm of Formlessness.

The False Ego

The body is empty. Form is empty. Whenever we say "I," I like this, I like that, I want this, I want that, I feel pain, I feel bad, or I feel good, what is this "I"? If you analyze it, it is just an aggregate of form, feeling, conception, volition, and consciousness. You have consciousness, you have volition, you think and conceptualize, you have feelings, you have a body. These are facts. Now where is the "you," where is the self in there? Is the "I" in the body, in the feeling, in the conception, in the consciousness, or in the volition? Which one is the "you"? One of my favorite poems is:

<i>We come into this world ignorant,</i>	
<i>We leave this world confused;</i>	來時糊塗去時迷
<i>This is a life lived in vain.</i>	空在人間走一回
<i>Before I was born, who was I?</i>	未曾生我誰是我
<i>After I am born, who am I?</i>	生我之後我是誰

Now ask yourself, I am John, I am Joe, I am so and so, what is the "I"? Buddha deeply questioned and rejected all speculations about the "I." Unfortunately, our idea of the "I" that seems so real is a concept, it is the ego, the false ego. So the "I" is empty because you can't find it in your body. If the "I" is in your body than what is feeling? If the "I" is in the feeling, then when the feeling changes, where is the "I"? If the "I" is in the conception, when you go to sleep

and are not conceptualizing, when you are not thinking, what happens? If the “I” is in the volition, when you are not willing to do anything, where is the “you”? If the “I” is in the consciousness, when you are not conscious, what happens? Where is the “I”? In fact, when you say, “he humiliated me, he hurt me,” it is really the ego that is hurt. You created an ego there to be stabbed by somebody else. Who stabbed it? You, you stabbed it yourself. So suffering, separation from loved ones, meeting with people you don’t like, these are the kinds of suffering that you can overcome immediately when you recognize the emptiness of the ego, the emptiness of the words. When someone says you are ugly, that hurts. Why does that hurt? Who is that he’s referring to? Your body? Your face? Is the face the true you? Is it? You can get a face-lift and your looks will change. You looked different when you were a baby and you will look different when you grow old. So that is not the true you. Then why are you angry when people say that you are ugly? They are referring to something that is not you.

Emptiness is Liberating

When you understand emptiness, then you will transcend this level of suffering. You will no longer be angry with anyone for what they say. This can be done, it is not wishful thinking. Someone may call you ugly but another person, such as your wife, may say you are handsome. Maybe it’s your wife who calls you ugly. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. You have other qualities. What is the point of arguing? It is silly to get angry when someone calls you ugly; just as silly as arguing with a Chinese whether Miss America is the most beautiful woman. Isn’t that right? It is exactly the same thing. It’s silly.

So emptiness is liberating. Emptiness is not pessimistic and is not depressing, it is a fact of nature. It is reality. It tells you that things are mutable, they change when conditions change. Ice changes into water, and water changes into steam. When conditions change, the phenomenon changes. Water is soft and cool, steam is hot and ice is hard and cold. Which is the true nature of water? None of these. Nor are they the true nature of hydrogen or oxygen. More importantly, your character can change. That is why you can go from a poor unhappy person to a liberated, open minded, peaceful, happy person because you are empty and you can change yourself. And you can see other people in the same way. No matter how bad, how evil they are, they are misguided. It is not their inherent trait. When things change or conditions change, they may repent, they may change their ways. So now you have faith in people. You now see how people are equal—equal in their emptiness, equal in their potential to grow, equal in their potential to be enlightened.

Clearly perceived the emptiness of the five skandhas, and transcended all suffering.

Your thoughts can change like your ideas. What did you like when you were a child? Lollipops or Barbie dolls? Do you like them now? Some of you still do! Some habits die hard. But habits do change. The things you like change and the things you hate change. So don’t get so stuck on the things you insist upon now. Try to see other points of view because they are also part of reality. It is part of awakening, it is part of a way to transcend suffering. Suffering is between both yourself and other people. When you act and interact, remind yourself that all this is conditional. People may have different points of view. People can come to understand the same phenomenon in different ways. Then your mind is opened up, like the vast empty space

that can accommodate everything. When something is solid, it cannot contain anything. If your mind is rigid and not empty, it becomes stiff. It cannot accommodate other people's views, you cannot put compassion in there, you cannot take the hatred out of there. That's why you need to open up like empty space. Then you can accommodate everything and come to understand everything.

We have to understand also that emptiness doesn't mean that we don't make judgments and that there is no right or wrong. When you are at work and the boss is not there, you can make a decision to either continue to work, or go surfing on the Internet. What is the right thing to do? Surfing on the Internet is not inherently wrong but when you do that at work it is wrong. And then there are times when we need to find some information on the Internet. Using the Internet is empty; it can be either right or wrong. There is the right time and situation for doing the right thing. When times change, when conditions change, what is right or wrong can change also. So that is something we need to understand.

Emptiness is liberating, and understanding it is called *prajñā* wisdom. It is a wisdom that understands and makes you see reality better. Earlier in our lecture we talked about education. There are terrorists in the world, they are extreme in their thinking and that is definitely very wrong. But what is the way to correct this wrong? One way is to bomb them; but another way, a more fundamental way is through education. I read a news report stating that a head of our state said that in a few months we have gotten rid of the terrorists, removed cruel punishments, liberated the people of Afghanistan, allowed the women to go to school, and so on. Then another report from Afghanistan said that technically these statements are true, but in reality, instead of terrorists they now have bandits all over. The women still do not go to school because there are no teachers in the schools. Some cruel laws have been modified. Before, when people committed adultery, they were stoned to death. Now, they get stoned to death by smaller rocks.

So there is more that we need to do. How can someone be so cruel, recruiting children and training them to be on the death squad to kill people? It is because they are misguided. That is why they need education – the right kind of education. Not just transmitting knowledge but teaching humility, teaching compassion, teaching emptiness, teaching people how to accommodate different cultures and different people, teaching and letting them know we are in this world together. Everyone affects everyone else. We are interdependent. What we do here affects other people; what they do there affects us. So we are a big family and we should teach other people these values in order to uproot hatred, in order to generate lasting peace. So we need to understand emptiness, we need to understand *prajñā pāramitā*.