

This is What I Heard

Finding the Heart in the Heart Sutra

“That which takes form is emptiness, and emptiness truly is that which takes form. Emptiness is not different from that which takes form, and that which takes form is not different from emptiness.”



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Class One: Popping the Question

The Heart Sutra

नमः सर्वज्ञाय ॥ नमो भगवत्यै आर्यप्रज्ञापारमितायै ॥

अथ प्रज्ञापारमिताहृदयसूत्रं ॥

namaḥ sarvajñāya ॥ namo bhagavatyai āryaprajñāpāramitāyai ॥
atha prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasūtram ॥

**I bow down to omniscience. I bow down to the Lady, the Realized One
who is the Perfection of Wisdom.
And now for the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra.**

एवं मया श्रुतं । एकस्मिन्समये भगवान्नाजगृहे विहरति स्म गृध्रकूटे

पर्वते महता भिक्षुसंघेन सार्धम् महता च बोधिसत्त्वसंघेन ।

evaṃ mayā śrutam । ekasminsamaye bhagavānrājagṛhe viharati sma gṛdhrakūṭe
parvate mahatā bhikṣusaṅghena sārddham mahatā ca bodhisattvasaṅghena ।

**This is what I heard: Once the Lord was spending time in Rajagriha on
a mountain called Vulture’s Peak, together with a great assembly of
monks and bodhisattvas.**

तेन खलु समयेन भगवान्गंभीरावसंबोध नाम समाधिं समापन्नः ।

tena khalu samayena bhagavāṅgambhīrāvasambodha nāma samādhim
samāpannaḥ ।

**Right there and then the Lord entered into a meditation known as “The
Perfect and Deep Awareness of the Profound.”**

तेन च समयेनार्यावलोकितेश्वरो बोधिसत्त्वो महासत्त्वो गंभीरायां प्रज्ञापारमितायां
चर्यां चरमाण एवं व्यलोकयति स्म । पञ्च स्कंधास्तांश्च स्वभावशून्यं
व्यवलोकयति ।

tena ca samayenāryāvalokiteśvaro bodhisattvo mahāsattvo gambhīrāyām
prajñāpāramitāyām caryām caramāṇa evaṃ vyalokayati sma | pañca
skandhāstāmśca svabhāvaśūnyam vyavalokayati |

And also at that time the Realized Being Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva, the Great Being, also began engaging in the practice of analyzing the profound, the perfection of wisdom. And he observed that the five groups are empty of any true nature.

अथायुष्माञ्छारिपुत्रो बुद्धानुभावेनार्यावलोकितेश्वरं बोधिसत्त्वं
महासत्त्वमेतदवोचत् ।

athāyuṣmāñchāripuro buddhānubhāvenāryāvalokiteśvaram bodhisattvaṃ
mahāsattvametadavocat |

Then the venerable Shariputra, acting under the authority of the Buddha, said this to the Realized Being Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva, the Great Being:

यः कश्चित्कुलपुत्रो गंभीरायां प्रज्ञापारमितायां चर्यां चर्तुकामः कथं शिक्षितव्यः ।
yaḥ kaścitkulaputro gambhīrāyām prajñāpāramitāyām caryām cartukāmaḥ
katham śikṣitavyaḥ |

“If any son of a good lineage wanted to engage in the practice of the profound, the perfection of wisdom, what would he need to learn?”

Exercise for Class One

Shariputra ends this section of the *Heart Sutra* with his crucial question: What is the true nature of reality, and how should we live in accordance with it?

What are your most pressing questions about life? We don't ordinarily pause to reflect on the big mysteries – What's the meaning of it all? What's my purpose here? Why do bad things happen to good people, and vice versa? – and this is your chance to do so!

In the space below, write down as many of your major existential questions you can think of. Then spend fifteen minutes each day for the next week really contemplating these queries. Take the time to wrestle with the mysteries of life and jot down your reflections.

Class Two: Form is Emptiness, and Emptiness is Form

The Heart Sutra, cont.

एवमुक्त आर्यावलोकितेश्वरो बोधिसत्त्वो महासत्त्व आयुष्मन्तं
शारिपुत्रमेतदवोचत् ।

evamukta āryāvalokiteśvaro bodhisattvo mahāsattva āyusmantam
śāriputrametadavocat ।

Having been so addressed, the Realized Being Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva, the Great Being, replied to the venerable Shariputra like this:

यः कश्चिच्छारिपुत्र कुलपुत्रो वा कुलदुहिता वा गंभीरायां प्रज्ञापारमितायां चर्या
चतुर्कामस्तेनैवं व्यवलोकयितव्यं । पञ्च स्कन्धास्तांश्च स्वभावशून्यान्समनुपश्यति
स्म ।

yaḥ kaścicchāriputra kulaputro vā kuladuhitā vā gambhīrāyām
prajñāpāramitāyām caryām cartukāmastenaivam vyavalokayitavyam । pañca
skandhāstāṃśca svabhāvaśūnyānsamanupaśyati sma ।

“Shariputra, this is what any son or daughter of a good lineage who wanted to engage in the practice of the profound, the perfection of wisdom, would need to observe: He or she would see that the five groups are empty of any true nature.

रूपं शून्यता शून्यतैव रूपम् । रूपान्न पृथक् शून्यता शून्यताया न पृथग्रूपं । यद्रूपं

सा शून्यता या शून्यता तद्रूपं । एवं वेदनासंज्ञासंस्कारविज्ञानानि च शून्यता ।

rūpaṁ śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpam | rūpānna pṛthak śūnyatā śūnyatāyā na
pṛthagrūpaṁ | yadrūpaṁ sā śūnyatā yā śūnyatā tadrūpaṁ | evaṁ
vedanāsañjñāsaṁskāravijñānāni ca śūnyatā |

That which takes form is emptiness, and emptiness truly is that which takes form. Emptiness is not different from that which takes form, and that which takes form is not different from emptiness. Whatever there is that takes form is emptiness, and whatever emptiness there is is that which takes form. And emptiness is also the feelings, discriminating capacities, the other mental factors, and the consciousnesses.

Exercise for Class Two

Every day for the next week, spend fifteen minutes a day meditating on who you really are and why the *Heart Sutra* declares the self to be “empty.”

First off, get in touch with that strong feeling that there is obviously a self, a “me.” Then examine your assumptions about who that “me” really is. You will find that the self we believe in is a continuous and unchanging thing (the “me” that watches me go through life), a unitary entity (there’s only “me”), and an independent being (a “master self” that controls the mind and body).

Then investigate whether the self you are so sure is really there is identical to its parts (the five “heaps” or “groupings” that comprise the mind-body complex mentioned in this section of the *Heart Sutra*), or different from those physical and mental components (an independent self that *has* a body and mind but is not *the same as* the body and mind).

Finally reflect on the problems that accompany either choice when it comes to the self’s relationship with the mind and body. If the self is the same as its parts, it can’t be unitary and unchanging; and if it is different than its parts (i.e., independent of them) then any kind of identification with one’s mind and/or body is foolish and erroneous.

Class Three: The Nature of All Things

The Heart Sutra, cont.

एवं शारिपुत्र सर्वधर्मा शून्यतालक्षणा अनुत्पन्ना अनिरुद्धा अमलाविमला अनूना
असंपूर्णाः ।

evam śāriputra sarvadharmā śūnyatālakṣaṇā anuṭpannā aniruddhā amalāvimalā
anūnā asampūrṇāḥ ।

And so it is, Shariputra, that all existing things are emptiness – without definitive characteristics, without beginning or end, neither pure nor impure, neither diminishing nor increasing.

तस्मात्तर्हि शारिपुत्र शून्यतायां न रूपम् न वेदना न संज्ञा न संस्कारा न विज्ञानं ।
tasmāttarhi śāriputra śūnyatāyām na rūpam na vedanā na sañjñā na saṃskārā na
vijñānam ।

And therefore, Shariputra, when seen from the viewpoint of emptiness there is nothing which takes form, no feelings, no discriminating capacities, no other mental factors, and no consciousnesses.

न चक्षुर्न श्रोत्रं न घ्राणं न जिह्वा न कायो न मनो न रूपं न शब्दो न गंधो न रसो
न स्प्रष्टव्यं न धर्माः । न चक्षुर्धातुर्यावन्न मनोधातुर्न धर्मधातुर्न मनोविज्ञानधातुः ॥
na cakṣurna śrotram na ghrāṇam na jivhā na kāyo na mano na rūpam na śabdo
na gandho na raso na spraṣṭavyam na dharmāḥ । na cakṣurdhāturyāvanna
manodhāturna dharmadhāturna manovijñānadhātuḥ ॥

There are no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind. And there is nothing to see, hear, smell, taste, touch, or think. There is no eye element and so on, right up to there not being the mind element, the element of what the mind thinks, and the element of the mental consciousness.

नाविद्या नाविद्या क्षयो यावन्न जरामरणं न जरामरणक्षयः ।

nāvidyā nāvidyā kṣayo yāvanna jarāmaraṇam na jarāmarañakṣayaḥ ।

There is no ignorance and no stopping of ignorance and so on, right up to there being no old age and death and no stopping of old age and death.

न दुःखसमुदयनिरोधमार्गा । न ज्ञानं न प्राप्तिर्नाप्रप्तिः ।

na duḥkhasamudayanirodhamārgā । na jñānam na prāptirnāpraptiḥ ।

There is no suffering, no cause, no cessation, and no path. There is no wisdom, nothing to attain and no lack of attainment.

Exercise for Class Three

The Heart Sutra declares in this section that “suffering is empty.” Every day this week spend some time thinking about the pain and difficulties in your own life and in what sense they could be said to be “empty.”

Remember, to regard something as “empty” does not mean it doesn’t exist at all. Suffering – yours and others’ – does exist, but only *dependently* and not *independently*.

So what do your problems really depend on? To what extent do you think such difficulties depend on people, experiences, or situations outside your control, and to what extent can they be said to depend on your interpretations of them and your attitudes toward them?

Class Four: The Mantra of the Perfection of Wisdom

The Heart Sutra, cont.

तस्माच्छारिपुत्र अप्राप्तित्वेन बोधिसत्त्वानां प्रज्ञापारमितामाश्रित्य विहरति
चित्तावरणः । चित्तावरणनास्तित्वाद्त्रस्तो विपर्यासातिक्रान्तो निष्ठनिर्वाणः ।

tasmācchāriputra aprāptitvena bodhisattvānām prajñāpāramitāmāśritya viharati
cittāvaraṇaḥ | cittāvaraṇanāstitvādatrasto viparyāsātikrānto niṣṭhanirvāṇaḥ |

Therefore, Shariputra, because there is nothing that bodhisattvas have attained, by relying on the perfection of wisdom one removes the obscurations of the mind. When there are no obscurations of the mind, there is no fear. Such a person goes beyond error and is in nirvana.

त्र्यध्वव्यास्थिता सर्वबुद्धाः प्रज्ञापारमितामाश्रित्यानुत्तरां

सम्यक्संबोधिमभिसम्बुद्धाः ।

tryadhvavyāsthitā sarvabuddhāḥ prajñāpāramitāmāśrityānuttarāṃ
samyaksambodhimabhisambuddhāḥ |

All the Buddhas of the past, present, and future, relying on the perfection of wisdom, are fully awakened to the highest state of complete enlightenment.

तस्माज्ज्ञातव्यः प्रज्ञापारमितामहामन्त्रो महाविद्यामन्त्रो ऽनुत्तरमन्त्रो ऽसमसममन्त्रः

सर्वदुःखप्रशमनमन्त्रः सत्यममिथ्यत्वात् प्रज्ञापारमितायामुक्तो मन्त्रः । तद्यथा ।

tasmājjñātavyaḥ prajñāpāramitāmahāmanthro mahāvīdyāmanthro 'nuttaramantro
'samāsamamantraḥ sarvaduḥkhaḥpraśāmanamantraḥ satyamamithyatvāt
prajñāpāramitāyāmukto mantraḥ | tadyathā |

**And so there is a great perfection of wisdom mantra you should know, a
mantra of great knowledge, an unsurpassed mantra, a mantra that is
equal to what has no equal, a mantra that puts an end to all suffering, a
mantra of the perfection of wisdom that, because it is true, has been
truly spoken. It goes like this:**

गते गते पारगते पारसंगते बोधि स्वाहा ॥

gate gate pāragate pārasaṅgate bodhi svāhā ||

एवं शारिपुत्र गंभीरायां प्रज्ञापारमितायां चर्यायां शिक्षितव्यं बोधिसत्त्वेन ।

evaṁ śāriputra gambhīrāyām prajñāpāramitāyām caryāyām śikṣitavyaṁ
bodhisattvena |

**And this, Shariputra, is what a bodhisattva would need to learn about
the practice of the profound, the perfection of wisdom.”**

अथ खलु भगवान् तस्मात् समाधेर्व्युत्थायार्यावलोकितेश्वरस्य बोधिसत्त्वस्य
महासत्त्वस्य साधुकारमदात् । साधु साधु कुलपुत्र एवमेतत्कुलपुत्र ।
एवमेतद्गंभीरायां प्रज्ञापारमितायां चर्यं चर्तव्यं यथा त्वया निर्दिष्टमनुमोये
सर्वतथागतैरर्हद्भिः सम्यक्संबुद्धैः ।

atha khalu bhagavān tasmāt samādhervyutthāyāryāvalokiteśvarasya
bodhisattvasya mahāsattvasya sādhu kārāmadāt । sādhu sādhu kulaputra
evametatkulaputra । evametadgambhīrāyām prajñāpāramitāyām caryam
cartavyam yathā tvayā nirdiṣṭamanumodye sarvatathāगतairarhadbhiḥ
samyaksambuddhaiḥ ।

And then the Lord came out of that meditation and bestowed his blessing upon Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva, the Great Being: “Well done! Well done, son of a good lineage! That is just how it is, o son of a good lineage. That is just how it is. What you’ve taught about what is to be practiced in the practice of the profound, the perfection of wisdom, pleases me and all Those Who Have Found Reality, all the Realized Beings, all the Fully Awakened Ones.”

इदमवोचद्भगवानानन्दमना आयुष्माञ्छारिपुत्र आर्यावलोकितेश्वरश्च बोधिसत्त्वो
महासत्त्वः सा च सर्वावती पर्षत्सदेवमानुषासुरगन्धर्वश्च लोको भगवतो
भाषितमभ्यनन्दन्निति ॥

idamavocadbhagavānānandamanā āyuṣmāñchāriputra āryāvalokiteśvaraśca
bodhisattvo mahāsattvaḥ sā ca sarvāvātī parṣatsadevamānuṣāsurasuragandharvaśca
loko bhagavato bhāṣitamabhyanandanniti ॥

When the Lord said this, the venerable Shariputa, the Realized Being Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva, the Great Being, together with the entire assembly – made up of gods, humans, titans, and spirits – began rejoicing, and the whole world rejoiced in what the Lord had spoken.

Exercise for Class Four

This week, make time each day to recite the famous mantra found in the *Heart Sutra*. While you are repeating these Sanskrit words, be sure to also be thinking about what they are said to symbolize: the five “paths” on your spiritual journey. Mentally review what characterizes each of these five stages and to what extent you have personally had such realizations in your own spiritual life.