

Approaching the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*

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The *Scripture of Great Wisdom* is recited every day in Sōtō Zen temples. It is a condensed description of what our body-and-mind is and its relationship to the world. This leads to a description of the path of training from a Mahayana point of view.

In this article, I don't attempt to directly 'explain' the meaning of the Scripture, but take another approach. I ask "What questions was the Scripture attempting to answer?" The teaching of Buddhism has always been a response to vital questions asked by trainees. I believe it is no accident that Scriptures are often in the form of a dialogue between someone who is groping toward an understanding of the truth, and the Buddha (or his representative). What always touches me about reading the Scriptures is that the questions that bring forth the teaching are the same questions we have today. For me, one of the main questions behind the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* is: "Do I have to go beyond this body and mind in order to be free, to find liberation?" This is connected to another question: "What is the nature of the 'goal' of training—nirvana: is it totally transcendent and outside of this world?"

The Buddha's teaching was for the purpose of helping beings see the cause of suffering for themselves. This leads to an

understanding of how to live within birth and death as Nirvana itself (as Dōgen puts it in the *Shushogi*). The historical Buddha taught many ways of doing this. One of these ‘tools’ was the analysis of what seems to constitute a ‘self.’ The Buddha taught a way of dividing up our experience into the skandhas that the Scripture talks about. He asked, “can you see a permanently abiding, separate self in any of: form, sensation, thought, activity and consciousness; or in any combination of these?” If we look with discernment, we cannot, and this has far reaching implications. But does it mean we have to reject what we are? This is one of the questions the Scripture addresses. Even though we cannot rely on the skandhas, neither can we get rid of them or go beyond them. In this article, I will try to explain the purpose of talking about the skandhas, and how the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* develops some of the earliest teaching on them into the view that they are fundamentally “unstained.”

Another aspect of the Buddha’s teaching was that he rejected the emerging Hindu teaching of the time that said there was an ‘atman,’ a kind of ‘soul’ independent of the body, that could become one with the universal principle ‘Brahma’ through ascetic exercises.¹ Even though Shakyamuni admitted the existence of gods, he regarded these as subject to impermanence, and not free from the wheel of suffering. He also refused to answer questions on whether an omnipotent being created the universe, because they didn’t address the fundamental question. So whilst there is a rejection of a reliance on the skandhas as a refuge, there is also a rejection of a reliance on what in India at the time was known as ‘Brahma,’ as a refuge. One of the other questions the Scripture addresses is what kind of refuge is

left, when there is no dependence on the skandhas or a supreme being that lives outside and above this world?

The earliest form of ‘refuge taking’ was to say “I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha.” Towards the end of the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*, it is said that “all the Buddhas of present, past and future” rely upon Great Wisdom itself. So, it is not that there is no refuge at all, only that this refuge is known as a result of a profound letting go, which undercuts all reliance on attempts to fix and define that refuge.

Without practising Zazen, the Scripture isn’t going to make much sense. It is grounded in experience: a way of seeing what this body-mind is without judgement (the view of Kanzeon). But without trying to understand its meaning, it is also not going to make much sense. The first Zen meditation group I went to only chanted the Scripture in medieval Japanese. It was explained that the ‘meaning’ was in the ‘doing’ of the chanting. This very vital Japanese way of chanting did teach me something, but I still questioned whether this was the only way to look at the Scripture. If the Scripture had a meaning that could not be understood through language then why did so many people make the effort to bring the Scriptures from India to China and Tibet and then to Japan, and translate them—often at great personal risk? I am grateful that Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett was encouraged to translate them by her Japanese master and brought this version to the West. However, as the Scriptures are translated, we do have to make the effort to recover the meaning and purpose of terms such as *sunyata* (emptiness) and *skandhas* (aggregates), that were the words used by the original writers of

the Scriptures. We cannot expect terms and concepts used two thousand years ago to immediately make sense; although what they are pointing to addresses real questions that arise every day even now.

The Skandhas in early Buddhism

The Buddha made it clear in his lifetime that his teaching was not concerned directly with philosophical questions, but was a *yana* or vehicle of liberation. The earliest recorded Pali Scriptures include many ways of analysing the nature of the body-mind, by dividing our experience into different elements. The purpose of these exercises was to show that what seemed like a continuous ‘self’, that was separate from existence, could never be found, neither in any one of the elements or in combination. Realising that an intrinsic self was illusory opened the way to further insights into the nature and cause of suffering. Looking at ourselves in terms of the skandhas was one of these techniques. There were several practices that worked in this way. It was also a practice to look at elements of the body in terms of the five elements (earth, air, water, fire, space). The point is not that we can really find such ‘things’ as separate entities, but that they give us a way of looking at ourselves more objectively—without being totally caught up in the emotions or thoughts of the moment.

The sanskrit term skandha originally meant “the trunk of a tree.” It has been suggested that this may refer to the multi-trunked banyan trees, so the five skandhas would be the five roots or trunks.² Later translators have used the word “aggregate” or “heap.” The point is that our experience of a ‘self’ is

based on the interaction of several different elements which were known as: *rupa* (form or matter), *vedana* (sensation or feeling), *samjna* (thought or mental conceptions), *samskara* (activity, desires, drives), and *vijnana* (consciousness). When the trainee in meditation turns their awareness to the body-mind, they can see that each of these skandhas is impermanent, not a self, and is a cause of suffering (if grasped). Here is a good example of the way this process is described, from the Pali Scriptures:

Thus I have heard: Once, when the Buddha was dwelling near Shravasti at Anathapinda Garden in Jeta Forest, the Bhagavan told the monks,

“Whatever is form is impermanent. And whatever is impermanent is suffering. And whatever is suffering is devoid of a self, ... and anything that might belong to a self. One who views things like this sees things as they really are. So, too, are sensation, thought, activity and consciousness impermanent. And being impermanent, they are suffering. And being suffering, they are devoid of a self and anything that might belong to a self. One who views things like this sees them as they really are. These noble disciples who view things like this are repulsed by form and repulsed by sensation, thought, activity and consciousness. And because they are repulsed by them, they do not delight in them. And because they do not delight in them, they are free of them. And those who are free give rise to the knowledge of how things really are and can claim: ‘My life is finally over, I have set forth on the path of purity, I have done what had to be done, and now I know I will experience no future existence.’³

According to this quote, the answer to our initial question: “Do I have to go beyond this body and mind in order to be

free?” seems to be on face value, “Yes.” The much later *Scripture of Great Wisdom*, though, takes this teaching and gives it a completely different emphasis: “The Holy Lord, Great Kanzeon bosatsu knew that the skandhas five were, as they are, in their self-nature, void, unstained and pure”. There is no use of the word “repulsion” in the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* and no claim that knowledge of the truth means the end of “future existence.” So how did this change come about?

The Mahayana

The quote above describes the ideal of the arahant as the trainee who is no longer destined for rebirth. All scholars agree that by four hundred years after the Buddha’s death, some Buddhist groups began to emphasize the path of the bodhisattva, that in some ways was more inclusive. An ordinary person could aspire to act like a bodhisattva and carry out bodhisattva acts. ‘Bodhicitta’ — which became vital to Sōtō Zen — was the wish to train: which was inseparable from the wish to help others. The paramitas (literally “the ways to the other shore”) became ideals of behaviour, and emphasised charity, patience, etc. as well as wisdom (prajna). The paramitas described how the trainee could act positively within social relationships, through the practice of giving, patience and morality.

Very little definite information is available on what caused this shift away from the ideal of the arahant. The Mahayana histories do talk of controversies over the definition of the arahant that to me point to the fact that such an ideal of perfection raised serious questions amongst ordinary people of the time. Although other schools dispute whether a Third Buddhist

Council took place, the emerging Mahayana schools include it in their histories. Whether or not it occurred, the fact that it is included in the early histories of the Mahayana, shows that the issues were considered important.

The Mahasanghika school claims that at the time of King Ashoka, in 267 BC, there was a Council over some points raised by the monk Mahadeva: was an Arahant still subject to sexual desire (for example in sexual dreams), was an Arahant still subject to doubt, and could an Arahant be given further instruction? The conclusion of the Council was “Yes” to all three of these questions.⁴ This was not just a pernickitty point but relates to the human experience of how we are. Does non-attachment to a ‘self’ mean we have no desires? Real experience shows us time and again that we are conditioned beings: conditioned by our sex, birthplace, upbringing and education; and yet the liberation the Buddha points to is a reality that can be practised, and our aspiration to find that liberation is also an irreducible aspect of ourselves.

These very real questions formed the background to the whole prajnaparamita Sutras that appeared around the same time as the early Mahayana schools of Buddhism. Buddhism did not stand still, but as a result of the continuing practice and reflection of living people, new Scriptures arose to answer particular needs. Increasingly ‘prajnaparamita’ or the paramita of wisdom was described as that which gave the other paramitas their ‘eyes’. For example, it was impossible to really practise the paramita of charity without prajna, or the correct view of what a being was.

It is just the perfection of wisdom which directs the five perfections in their ascent on the path to all-

knowledge. Just as...people born blind...cannot without a leader, go along a path and get to a village, town or city: just so Giving, Morality, Patience, Vigour and Trance [concentration] cannot by themselves be called 'perfections', for without the perfection of wisdom they are as if born blind.⁵

This emphasis on the perfection of Wisdom can be seen as development of the Buddha's original teaching on impermanence (*annica*) and no-self (*anatta*). Seeing through meditation that the skandhas are in a state of flux, no permanent intrinsic self can be found with which to identify. But this was not to deny that we physically exist in some way. The intention of meditation was to show the way to liberation by weakening grasping to an intrinsic self. This is the sense that 'I' exist, and this 'I' has somehow existed continuously throughout my life. The sense also, that this intrinsic self is not dependent on other causes but has, somehow, come into being by itself. When put this way it sounds ridiculous, how could we come into being without our parents and the whole past that has existed up until now? However, we often act and think in ways that assume we do have a totally independent existence. For example when we feel slighted we may say to ourselves "That person had no right to do that. I have the right to be respected in such and such a way..." On a political level I believe it is good and necessary to have moral values that affirm rights as an ideal to strive for, but the Scripture is talking on an internal level about the limitations of ideals. If we are already connected to our past and existence in general we are already 'limited' and conditioned by events beyond our control. We are a part of these events already. So we definitely exist, but we do not exist as independent separate beings, separate from the movement of existence.

So the purpose of the early prajnaparamita texts, associated with such teachers in our lineage as Nagarjuna, was to cut through the reliance on the sense of an intrinsic self and to see that this led to a much greater freedom. If we are not fixed independent entities we can move forward towards liberation. The causes of practising such paramitas as giving, morality and patience, guided by wisdom, have the ‘effect’ of liberation. In fact the “mind that seeks the way,” the wish to save all beings, is an aspect of impermanence and no-self. It is not to be rejected. Our conditioned self is not something to be transcended in the sense of ‘going above’ a self.

Nagarjuna taught that dependent origination and emptiness (sunyata) were inseparable. Seeing how we are conditioned by the interaction of the skandhas with the world through the senses, we see how our sense of a self is dependent on other factors. Our mood can vary from day to day, even with changes in the weather. This interdependence shows us that there is no intrinsic self to cling to: it is ‘empty.’ This does not mean there is nothing there, it just means it is inseparable from existence. Being inseparable from existence is not a problem as long as we do not identify with any aspect of existence and cling to it. Behind the Buddha’s teaching and its development in the Mahayana is a fundamental optimism. Existence is not the problem: clinging or craving is. If this were not so liberation would be impossible.

When we read or recite the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* it is worth bearing in mind, that the purpose is not deny the existence of everything and leave us with nothing. It is a very pithy condensed version of the much longer versions of the prajnaparamita Scriptures that dealt with the points mentioned above

in detail. The purpose is to see directly how restrictive any identification with the skandhas or even a sense of a ‘being’ on the path of training can be, as this quote from the verse section of the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* shows:

No wisdom can we get hold of, no highest perfection
No Bodhisattva, no thought of enlightenment either,
When told of this, if not bewildered and in no way anxious
A Bodhisattva courses in the Well-Gone’s [Buddha’s] wisdom.
In form, in feeling, will, perception and awareness,
Nowhere in them they find a place to rest on.
Without a home they wander, dharmas never hold them,
Nor do they grasp at them—the Jina’s [Buddhas] Bodhi
they are bound to gain. ⁶

The Scripture cuts through delusion, and it can feel like we are losing cherished beliefs and ideas, but the purpose is not to reject our experiences and sense of what we are as valueless. In fact self-deprecation is just another view we can cling to and use as an excuse not to go forward. Letting go of everything, we are on the path of the Buddha’s Wisdom.

The Scripture of Great Wisdom

Having promised not to attempt to comment too much on the Scripture itself, I will just briefly touch on those parts of the Scripture that relate to what for me, has been the core question: “Do I have to go beyond this body and mind in order to be free, to find liberation?”

It is significant that Kanzeon, the Bodhisattva of compassion, is the one who gives the teaching of the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*. Seeing with “deepest wisdom of the heart” the nature of the skandhas is also compassion. It is similar to the role prajna plays within the six paramitas: only when we see the non-substantiality of separate selves can a compassionate response, based on conditions as they are, come forth.

When one with deepest wisdom of the heart
That is beyond discriminative thought,
The Holy Lord, great Kanzeon Bosatsu,
Knew that the skandhas five were, as they are,
In their self-nature, void, unstained and pure.

This description extends the practice of viewing the skandhas quoted on p. 19. But there is no mention of seeing the suffering inherent in the impermanence of the skandhas or of “repulsion” towards them. Instead they are “void, unstained and pure” (pure is “sunya” in the Sanskrit here, usually translated as “empty” in this context).

The skandhas have no inherent existence in themselves, they are empty in the same way that a sense of an intrinsic self is empty, they only exist in relation to other things—as inextricably part of existence. But this does not mean we have to go beyond them to find the truth. In fact as the next line of the Scripture says, there is no ‘beyond’, because “Form is emptiness, Emptiness is form”. The longer *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* (verse section) expands on this:

If he knows the five skandhas as like an illusion,
But makes not illusion one thing, and the Skandhas another;

If, freed from the notion of multiple things, he courses in peace -

Then that is his practice of wisdom, the highest perfection.⁷

So the skandhas are ‘unreal’ or “like illusion” if we try to make them the basis of a substantial self, but this does not deny they exist. We do not divide the world into reality and illusion. It is how they are ‘seen’ or ‘known’ with “greatest wisdom of the heart”, that is crucial. In zazen there are ‘things’ constantly arising — feelings, memories, thoughts — but without holding on or pushing them away their “self-nature” is seen as “void, unstained and pure.” When we hold on or reject what arises, then they are seen as either a problem or something we want. Dōgen describes *Zazen* as “neither trying to think nor trying not to think” in his *Rules for Meditation*. This is seeing neither illusion nor substantial existence. It goes very deep. At this level we cannot say where the cause of suffering begins. Do we cling to things because we see them as substantial, or do we make them substantial by clinging to them? The Scripture points to the heart of this fundamental question, encouraging us to go ever deeper.

O Shariputra, form is only pure,
Pure is all form; there is, then, nothing more
Than this, for what is form is pure and what
Is pure is form; the same is also true
Of all sensation, thought, activity
And consciousness.

A huge amount of commentary exists on these lines alone. As a way of approaching the Scripture, I find it useful to ask “why is it presented in this way?” If the first skandha of form (and later the other four skandhas) are seen as identical with sunya, why repeat this in four different ways, in different sequences? The context of how Buddhism developed does help to explain things. If Kanzeon just said “form is emptiness,” we could make the mistake of thinking that having seen the ‘emptiness’ of our selves and the skandhas, we should seek to find something transcending them as a refuge. But this ‘escape route’ is firmly blocked, because emptiness is itself form and there is “nothing more than this,” no other alternative reality. Emptiness is not some kind of quality or substance that could itself have intrinsic existence independent of form ⁸, there is only form-emptiness or emptiness-form.

This identity of form-emptiness could wrongly be interpreted as pure materialism, as if we were just matter, and all thoughts, consciousness and spirituality could be explained as material processes, but this is not the intention. The intention is always to point the way to liberation, and sunyata is not a neutral term ⁹. By saying “emptiness is form” we are affirming that the absence of a fixed self-nature is the nature of reality. It is this absence that allows practice and enlightenment to function freely (inseparable from form). Rev. Master Jiyu called sunyata “non-substantial liberated existence,” and this has a tradition going right back to Nagarjuna who saw that interdependence and sunyata were inseparable.¹⁰ The changing interconnected movement of existence, itself, is the nature of reality. Because form is empty of substance it is “liberated,” and there is no need to avoid impermanence or fear change.

This leads me to jump towards the end of the Scripture where it says:

...for here

There is no suffering, nor yet again

Is there accumulation, nor again

Annihilation nor an Eightfold Path,

No knowledge, no attainment.

This looks like a denial of the Four Noble Truths: that suffering exists, that suffering is caused by craving, the end of craving is nirvana, and the way to the cessation of craving is through the eightfold path. Actually Kanzeon is not undermining the original teaching, just saying that from this view of the skandhas, there is not a progression from seeing suffering to seeing its cause, to seeing its end: but there is just the seeing of the skandhas as they are, which is “unstained.” If they are originally “unstained” they do not become pure later. However, there is still practice to be done.

One dialogue that Great Master Dōgen quotes several times in his *Shōbōgenzō* goes as follows:

When Dai-e first went to train with Daikan Enō, Enō asked him “What is it that comes like this?”

Dai-e sat with this question for many years, and eventually said: “It is not that there is no practice and enlightenment, but that it is unstained.”¹¹ This is one very personal answer to the question: “Do I have to go beyond this body and mind in order to be free, to find liberation?” found after deep study over a long period.

For me, seeing that practice and enlightenment is “unstained,” has been a way into what has often seemed like a baffling Scripture. We do have to make the effort to train. But this effort is not based on the presumption that there is something fundamentally wrong with us, that has to be got rid of, or even ‘converted.’ There are the results of effort, which is, as we noted earlier, part of interdependence and impermanence—of *sunyata*. The effort is based on the “unstained.” Because it is unstained, however disturbing it may be to sit with the inadequacies, fears and desires that arise, there is a way forward. These very things can teach us directly because they are unstained, and the route to seeing their unstained nature is through looking into the heart of what these things are.

There are many other ‘layers’ to the Scripture. It refers back to many other teachings of earlier Buddhism and comments on them, taking them deeper. To approach the Scripture seems to take a mental effort, in terms of understanding the language and context of the terms used, together with a more contemplative way of reflecting on it in relation to our own practice: the questions that are alive for us now. It also has to be approached with veneration. In morning service we do six bows and make an offering of incense or a candle before reciting the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*. These bows are part of the Scripture. In his chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō* called ‘*Maka-hannya-haramitsu*,’ Dōgen says, “Just at this moment of bowing in veneration, *prajñā* is realized as explanations that can be understood.”¹² Bowing itself can be seen as *prajna*. However, as Dōgen makes clear in many places, this doesn’t stand against the necessity of studying the Scriptures. “Understanding” comes through

a process involving all the elements of familiarizing ourselves with the language of the Scriptures, the struggles of daily life, and the expression of respect and gratitude. My personal way of approaching the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* will not be the same as yours, but I hope that I have shown that the Scripture is relevant and it is well worth making the effort to approach it. Through this effort we don't just make it relevant to our lives; we begin to break down the artificial distinction between the teaching of the Scriptures and the teaching of existence itself.

Notes

1. Collinson, Diane (et al), *Fifty Eastern Thinkers, Routledge Key Guides*, (London and N York: Routledge, 2000) pp. 64-65.
2. Pine, Red. *The Heart Sutras*, (USA: Shoemaker &Hoard, 2004), p. 57.
3. *Samyukt Agam: 9: Pali Canon*. Red Pine's translation, p. 91; except I substitute the terms Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett used for the skandhas: form, sensation, thought, activity and consciousness.
4. This is reported in a text by Vasumitra: these same points are discussed and condemned in Moggaliputta *Tissa's Kathavatthu*, but there is no mention of this Council in Theravadin sources. So there are several accounts of the same dispute. See Williams, Paul. *Mahayana Buddhism*, (Oxon: Routledge, 1989) pp. 18-19.
5. Conze, Edward. *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & its Verse Summary*, (San Fransisco: Four Seasons, 1990) page 136. and Chapter vii 1, 2, a.
6. Ibid. p. 9 -10.
7. Conze, Trans. Op cit. p. 10, verse 14.
8. Dalai Lama, *Essence of the Heart Sutras*, trans. Geshe Thupten Jinpa, (MA, USA: Wisdom, 2005) p. 117 "We are not speaking of emptiness as some kind of absolute stratum of reality, akin to, say the ancient

Indian concept of Brahma, which is conceived to be an underlying absolute reality from which the illusory world of multiplicity arises". This though is only the view of the Madhaymika School, which was developed further by the later Yogacara school, who tended to use more positive language to describe emptiness.

9. See MacPhillamy, Rev. Master Daizui. *Sunyata* in *The Journal of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives*, Winter 2009-2010.
10. Jiyu-Kennett, Rev. Master Lecture on Makahannyaharamitsu,' 28th August 1980 Pt1, disc. 1. For an expansion of this see The Dalai Lama, op cit. pp. 114-117, and pp. 41-46. Also Collinson, Diane (et al) op. cit. on Nagarjuna; eg. p. 99, Nagarjuna says: "The self is not different from states [conditions], nor identical with them; there is no self without the states; nor is it considered non-existent."
11. Great Master Dōgen, *Shinji-Shōbōgenzō*, pt 2, no. 1, Nishijima & Cross, trans. (London: Windbell, 2003) p. 137. Also in *Shōbōgenzō*, Book 1, Nishijima & Cross, trans. (London: Windbell, 1994) 'Senjo', p. 57: Dōgen says: "The sixth Patriarch asks Zen Master Dai-e of Kannon-in temple on Nangaku-zan mountain, "Do you rely on practice and experience or not?" Dai-e says, "It is not that there is no practice and experience, but the state can never be tainted". Dōgen also quotes this in 'Inmo' and 'Hensan.'
12. Great Master Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, Volume I (Taishō Volume 82, Number 2582), Nishijima & Cross, trans., p. 32. Dōgen tells this story: "In the order of Śākyamuni Tathāgata there is a bhikkhu who secretly thinks, "I shall bow in veneration of the profound prajñāpāramitā. Although in this state there is no appearance and disappearance of real dharmas, there are still understandable explanations of all precepts, all balanced states, all kinds of wisdom, all kinds of liberation, and all views."