

The *Scripture of Great Wisdom*

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The *Scripture of Great Wisdom*, also known as the *Heart Sutra*, is considered to be the most widely known Sutra in all of Buddhism. It originally appeared in a Sutra called the *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra*, which apparently was a compilation of forty shorter Sutras. According to scholars they're not quite sure if the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* was actually written independently and was incorporated into the larger Scripture or if it was distilled out from the larger Scripture. So that's still unknown, but that's where it first appears in written form, and it was first written around the beginning of the Common Era. So we're looking at a Scripture that was written about two thousand years ago.

The *Scripture of Great Wisdom* is said to be like the teachings in the larger *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutras*, which are teachings that Shakyamuni gave on Vulture Peak. Although they were written down long after the historical Buddha's death, important Mahayana Scriptures often began with a description of the place where the Buddha spoke the Scripture and his audience. The assembly at Vulture Peak is also in the *Lotus Sutra* and represents the Sangha as a whole. ¹ In Mahayana Buddhism the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* is one of the most important, particularly in China and Japan, and it's the most prominent Scripture in Zen because it very concisely and clearly discusses

sunyata: voidness or emptiness. This is what we will be looking at in the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*. And I will present it from a certain perspective; one that I hope will be of benefit to all of you, as it has been for me.

For me the movement towards this particular perspective has its origins—going as far back as I can remember—in a sense of separateness. And as I started my Buddhist training and became a Buddhist, I realised that Buddhism directly addresses this. So it was nice to know I wasn't alone in my feelings of separateness. The feeling or sense of separateness is one way of talking about the arising of duality, the arising of the opposites. It is directly talking about what each and every one of us is aware of. In fact, I think it is true to say that the most pervasive and significant characteristic of being human is that we have this sense of being an 'I', a 'me': of having 'my body' and 'my mind'. And essentially every human problem that exists can be brought back down to this sense of being an 'I', of this sense of separateness. So in looking at the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*, which is very directly addressing this thing we call an 'I'—a 'me'—we find it is equally valid today as it was some two thousand years ago. Maybe even more so, when you think of the billions of people on this earth, so many of whom are pursuing different and incompatible ends.

The *Scripture of Great Wisdom* correctly identifies the crux of the matter of being human, which is this sense of my body and my mind. And then asks in essence: what is this collection, this complex that we call my body and my mind? Then, after looking at and describing what it is—in very careful and specific detail—it shows us very clearly what to do with that feeling, with that sense of having a body and mind. In less than

one page the Scripture succinctly describes what it is to be human, and then shows us how to train.

Traditionally Buddhism has described our body-mind complex in terms of what are called the five skandhas. But it is important to point out that the number five is not critical. The skandhas are basically a scheme for looking at and analysing our body and mind by differentiating it into five layers or categories. Some Buddhist schools however, have described six or seven skandhas, so the actual number isn't important. What is important is that this scheme presents these different patterns in a way that is quite easy to remember and very useful in recognizing aspects of ourselves and how to train with them.

The word *skandha*, which is a Sanskrit word, literally means a heap or a pile and most commonly it is translated as aggregate. I usually think of a skandha as a collection or grouping of something. Whichever word we use, it is important to remember that each one of the skandhas is actually an event or process. There is a very dynamic quality to each skandha, which we will look at a bit later on. Rather than going into great detail on each skandha, I want to present them conceptually to give you a feel for them and then move on to the Scripture and what it's pointing to.

The first skandha: form, or matter, is basically our physical body and there are two approaches we can take in looking at it. One is to look at what it is physically made up of, what its constituents are (which are known as the five elements). The second way of looking at our physical body is in terms of how it functions and this is described by our five senses and the five sense objects—eye, ear, nose, tongue and body, and the sense objects, being: sights, sounds, smells, tastes and the sense

of touch. The next skandha is sensation. Sensations have to do with the information coming in from our senses and whether it is pleasurable, painful or neutral. So when we walk outside in the morning, is it cold, or hot, or just another reasonable day? Is the light too bright, does our knee hurt or is it fine and so on. Sensations have to do with basic physical feelings. The third skandha is thought and has to do with our language system. It is the mental images, symbols and words that we have and how we use these to organize and structure our experience—our experience that is coming in through the senses. The fourth skandha, activity or volition, has to do with our emotions. And emotions, as the name implies, involve a moving outward, us ‘emoting’ something, us doing something. Greed, anger and delusion are three main ways of acting, and all the emotions are incorporated within the skandha of volition. The final skandha, consciousness, has to do with the five sense consciousnesses for the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body respectively. A fundamental Buddhist teaching is that you have to have three things coming together at the same time to register that you are seeing something, register that you are hearing something or tasting something. So you have to have a sense organ that’s working properly, you have to have a sense object and then a consciousness specific to that organ and sense object. ²

Buddhism also teaches that as well as the five sense consciousnesses we have a sixth aspect of the consciousness skandha, namely the mind, which is conscious of the contents of the mind. Mind consciousness coordinates all the other consciousnesses, which are conscious of the input from all the other senses. So that is roughly how Buddhism has historically grouped all of the different components of our body and mind

complex; indicating that is what we are, what we are composed of, and how we function.

Now with that as a brief background, let us start looking at the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*. In this Scripture Kanzeon is talking to Sariputra, who was regarded as the disciple foremost in wisdom, and is helping him to deepen his understanding of Wisdom. (In many Scriptures, like the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*, the Buddha remains in meditation whilst a Bodhisattva speaks on his behalf, so it is understood that this is still Shakyamuni Buddha's teaching).³ What the Scripture says is that, Kanzeon Bosatsu, at the deepest level of wisdom—the wisdom of the heart — found out something, experienced something, knew something. And it is very clearly stated that this Wisdom of the Heart has nothing to do with discriminative thought or knowledge. In other words, this knowing comes from deepest wisdom, or deepest understanding, or deepest experiencing of the skandhas, “as they are,” which we should see connects to what we are trying to do when we meditate. This is to simply experience things; be aware of things as they are.

Now Kanzeon Bosatsu is each and every one of us, or is being expressed by each and every one of us, when we are meditating and experiencing things as they are. The crucial aspect of compassion that we're expressing is the ability to simply be present with things as they are. In other words, as we try not to push away, not to hold on, over time, we experience things more and more deeply as they are. And therefore Kanzeon is saying to Sariputra in the first sentence, that when any being meditates and experiences things as they are, they experience the five skandhas in their self-nature as “void, unstained and pure.” To have a “self-nature” is to have the nature of a self, where a

self is defined as a fixed independent existence or separate reality. When we fully unpack the first sentence of the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*, Kanzeon is saying that the nature of this self, which is a collection of the five skandhas, this ‘I’ — defined as a fixed independent existence, a separate reality — is void, is empty. In short, thinking there is a self is incorrect — wrong. Actually there isn’t a separate self, a fixed independent ‘I.’

Now as we have just seen, at the beginning Kanzeon says that all five skandhas which make up a human being are void and empty of self-nature. Then the Scripture goes through each one of the skandhas; goes through each one of the senses; through each one of the sense objects, and says the same thing. Eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind, those are void, those are empty. Sights, sounds, taste, smells, touch, those are all empty, those are all void of self-nature. Everything that we can raise and present as an aspect of being human is given the same response of: “No, that is empty, that is void.” No aspect of a human being has a fixed separate existence.

There are no substitutes for experiencing the voidness of body and mind but what I would like to do is offer an analogy to try and give a sense of what is being presented in the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*. The analogy is that of a rainbow and to orient ourselves we can begin by considering a few questions that relate to the skandhas. Is a rainbow real? Does it have a fixed independent existence? Or is it empty and void?

So what does it take to make a rainbow? What needs to occur for a rainbow to appear? As with our discussion of the skandhas, the number of factors it takes isn’t exact, but very handily it is five. Briefly, as I hope these factors are quite appar-

ent and familiar, they are as follows. Our first factor is that we need sunlight. We then need air, as in our atmosphere. And then we need to have raindrops in the air. Our fourth factor is we need to have an observer. And finally we need to have a specific orientation between the observer, the sun and the raindrops. Generally, as we are looking at the rain drops in the air, the sun needs to be at our backs.

Only when we get these five factors coming together, do we get a rainbow appearing. And if we take any one of them away, there's no rainbow. If you've just been looking at this beautiful rainbow and a cloud goes in front of the sun, the rainbow disappears, it's gone. Now if this happens do we say: "Oh my gosh, the rainbow just died!" It may seem like a kind of funny thing to bring up, but it has some important implications. The sun is still there and there is still sunlight. The other four factors are also there but they are not in the same place anymore. So nothing, fundamentally, has changed, every thing is still around; it's just not all in the same place anymore. So, it's only when you get the confluence of these five factors that you get a rainbow emerging or appearing. Another important way of understanding this is that when a rainbow appears, it means that all those five factors are there too. To say there's a rainbow is shorthand for saying you have those five things. In other words, a rainbow doesn't have a fixed separate existence, but a rainbow will always appear when those five factors come together at the same time in the same place.

Since these five factors and a rainbow all arise at the same time, we say they are co-arising. Because you can never get a rainbow without any one of the five factors we say they are all co-dependent or interdependent. And because they must all be

in the same place we say the rainbow and the five factors are interpenetrating. But this is what void or empty of self-nature literally means. A rainbow has no separate fixed existence; it is co-arising, co-dependent, interdependent existence.

Now the same understanding we have come to with our analogy, also holds for human beings and the five skandhas. When we talk about a human being it means that form, sensation, thought, activity and consciousness are all present there in the same place at the same time, and that's what a human being is. To say a human being, to say a person, is a shorthand way of saying that all of those five skandhas have co-arisen, are interpenetrating, and interdependent. As with a rainbow appearing, when these five skandhas come together: here we are.

To take this a step further, let us look, for example, at the first skandha, the skandha of form, our physical body. Depending on the Buddhist tradition or the historical time, the physical body is said to be composed of four, five, or six elements. The five elements are earth, water, fire, air/wind and space, and we are composed of different proportions of each one of those elements. We are made up of a solid (earth) element, a liquid (water) element, a warm (fire) element and so on. Although modern science might use quite different terminology, it would still agree that our physical form is made up of many different constituents. What this shows though, is that if you take just one of the skandhas you find that it's actually made up of many factors too. And this means that the skandha of form is co-arising and interdependent, interpenetrating with other factors: the five elements. So just as the human being co-arises and is interdependent with the five skandhas, any given skandha is that way too with its constituent elements. Just as a human being is

empty, each one of the skandhas is empty. And if we look at the five elements carefully and ask, for example, where does the water element of the body end, and the water element of say, walking out in the rain, or the water element of the earth begin, we find there is no boundary line. We can't separate the water of our bodies from the water of the earth. And it is the same for each of the five elements. They are continuous with those elements on the earth and they are continuous with the elements of the whole universe.

Pictorially we might represent what we've described above as circles within circles within circles. There is this incredibly dynamic web of factors that are all inter-penetrating and all co-arising within each other all the time. And when we use the word 'you' and say 'you' exist, what this really means is the whole universe exists. Because there's a you, because there's a me, means there's a co-arising, interdependent universe also. There's fundamentally no way to separate anything.

In looking at ourselves—the skandhas, and the elements that comprise them—we see the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* is presenting the image of a completely interdependent universe: a dynamic, flowing, changing, but completely one, completely whole, unified universe that we are within. We find that words get a little bit difficult, because the words are always setting up ideas of discrete separate things and actually it's one big flow.

As we begin to see what the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* is pointing to—that each and every one of us lives in this immense unified universe that's flowing and changing—more of its teachings start to make sense, at least conceptually. There is the phrase; “They are neither born, nor do they wholly die.” Are we born, do we die, from this deeper perspective? Because

a person is the coming together of the five skandhas in the same place we can perhaps call this “being born.” But since the five skandhas are always changing and flowing this would mean a person is always being born. “Nor do they wholly die.” If the five skandhas aren’t in the same place, aren’t interpenetrating, there’s no less of the five skandhas, but there wouldn’t be a person. From this perspective we see that it is not quite correct to say that people are born or that they die. Two lines later in the Scripture it says: “increasing not, decreasing not.” We are beginning to understand that the skandhas and all the factors of which they are made up are no less present or no more present. And so the Scripture continues, “Nor yet again is there accumulation, nor again annihilation. Until we come to where old age and death have ceased and so has all extinction of old age and death.” And so we see that it is incorrect to say that there is no old age and death (or birth and youth) and that it is incorrect to say there is just old age and death (or birth and youth). It is actually both at the same time depending on which way you are looking at it—which level you are looking at.

What’s important within the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* is that the Buddha is offering this as teaching to all of us. The feeling of separateness is painful and is a source of suffering. And for each and every one of us, there are those things within ourselves that are painful and cause us suffering. They’re not the full reason why we’ve come to training, but they are a significant part of it. So within the teaching of voidness, of emptiness, what should we do with that sense of suffering? Towards the end of the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* it talks about relying on the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*, to rely on Great Wisdom, to

rely on great understanding. We should rely on the teaching of voidness, of emptiness because “It is the very truth, no falsehood here.” Each one of us comes to training without this full experience, without this full knowledge. But the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* asks us to take this as the Truth, rely on this and to become one with it. We need to start looking at what we do in daily life from the point of view of the analogy of a rainbow; start looking at it from this unified whole universe that we live in that’s constantly changing, and from that perspective, look at our behaviour and see how well that fits with living in this kind of universe.

It has been said that the only difference between an ordinary human being and a Buddha is attachment. We all live in the same universe, but interact with it differently. A Buddha lives in the universe in a non-attached way, and we ordinary human beings tend to hold on and push away quite a lot. In the chapter called “*Ūji*” in the *Shōbōgenzō*, Dōgen describes this flowing, changing universe that we live in. Rev. Master Jiyu used to describe this flowing universe as being like a great river and that the way we should train was by simply putting our hand in the river and opening up our hand. When we do that over time we find that there is no separateness between what we call ‘us’ and the universe we’re in. And any time we try to grab (or push away) we immediately feel the separateness, in one way or another.

The *Scripture of Great Wisdom* begins by saying that we should exemplify—express—great compassion, which enables us to see things as they are, experience what this universe is really like. And we do this by not holding on and not pushing away, by simply meditating as Serene Reflection Meditation

teaches us. When we see things as they are we know how to proceed, which is to allow ourselves to be engulfed in, to be moved on with, this universe we're part of, by slowly letting go of all the places where we hold on or push away. This is expressed so beautifully in the last sentence of the Scripture "Oh Buddha, going, going, going on beyond, and always going on beyond, always BECOMING Buddha, Hail!Hail! Hail!"

The universe is always going on, how about us? The suffering is in being left behind, not keeping up with, not moving with the ever-flowing universe and thereby experiencing our separateness from it. This becoming Buddha is at each and every moment, because this is a dynamic ever-changing universe we live in. In responding to it, in seeing what it is we need to do by letting go, or not pushing away, so we are able to continue going with it. That's what being Buddha is. Being Buddha is being with the whole universe as it unfolds. And always remember the "Hail! Hail! Hail!"

It is an absolutely wondrous, exquisite universe we live in and it can be fully trusted.

This article is based on a talk given during the Summer Training Period at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey in 2007.

Notes

1. This is explained in: The Dalai Lama, *Essence of the Heart Sutra*, trans. Jinpa, G. T. (Boston: Wisdom, 2002) p. 68. [Ed.]
2. Narada Thera, *The Buddha and his Teachings*, (Taipei, Taiwan: The corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 1977). See especially p. 711 — 712.
3. *Essence of the Heart Sutra*, pp.78-79, op.cit. In many Scriptures the Buddha remains in meditation whilst a Bodhisattva speaks on their behalf, so it is understood that this is still the Buddha's teaching. [Ed.]