



First Parish in Brewster
Rev. Erik Walker Wikstrom

Form and Emptiness

August 26, 2007

"Nothing is created and nothing is destroyed."

-- *Lavoisier*

Opening Words: Our opening words come from a twelfth century Chinese woman who, in the Taoist tradition attained the title, "Clear and Calm Free Human" and is considered one of the Seven Immortals:

Cut brambles long enough,
Sprout after sprout,
And the lotus will bloom
Of its own accord:
Already waiting in the clearing,
The single image of light.
The day you see this,
That day you will become it.

~ *Sun Bu-er*

Reading: Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, doing deep prajna paramita, clearly saw emptiness of all the five conditions, thus completely relieving misfortune and pain. O Shariputra, form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form; form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form. Sensation, conception, discrimination, awareness are likewise like this. O Shariputra, all dharmas are forms of emptiness, not born, not destroyed, not stained, not pure, without loss, without gain. So in emptiness there is no form, no sensation, conception, discrimination, awareness, no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind, no color, sound, smell, taste, touch, phenomena, no realm of sight, no realm of consciousness, no ignorance and no end to ignorance, no old age and death and no end to old age and death, no suffering, no cause of suffering, no extinguishing, no path, no wisdom and no gain. No gain, and thus the bodhisattva lives prajna paramita with no hindrance in the mind. No hindrance, therefore no fear. Far beyond deluded thoughts, this is nirvana. All past, present, and future Buddhas live prajna paramita and therefore attain anuttara-samyak-sambodhi. Therefore, know prajna paramita is the great mantra, the vivid mantra, the best mantra, the unsurpassable mantra. It completely clears all pain—this is the truth, not a lie. So set forth the prajna paramita mantra. Set forth this mantra and say:

*Gate! Gate! Paragate! Parasamgate!
Bodhi svaha! Prajna Heart Sutra!*

~ Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra

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A few months back I spoke to our Humanist Group, and then again to one of our Buddhist groups, about the intersections of Buddhism, Humanism, and Unitarian Universalism. As an anchor point I used the text we just heard, the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra.

The Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra is one of the primary texts of Buddhism. In the form we just heard it, it is chanted daily at the Zen Mountain Monastery where I, and others from our congregation, have studied. It is recited by monks, and nuns, and lay people in a variety of Buddhist traditions around the world. The Heart Sutra is the condensation of a large corpus of scriptures dealing with the subject of Prajna, or Wisdom; you might say that it's the "executive summary" of these texts.

And it's a fascinating scripture in and of itself because, as the sharp-eared among you may have noticed, it has managed to become one of the central scriptures of Buddhism while effectively refuting a central teaching of the Buddha. Not a bad trick.

You may remember that the Buddha's first teaching—called the Four Noble Truths—goes something like this: life is suffering; the cause of suffering is our attachments; one can extinguish suffering by extinguishing attachment; and the way to do this can be described as an eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Following this eightfold path leads one to gain in wisdom and, ultimately, attain enlightenment as did the Buddha.

Yet the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra says pretty clearly,

“in emptiness there is no form, no sensation, conception, discrimination, awareness, no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind, no color, sound, smell, taste, touch, phenomena, no realm of sight, no realm of consciousness, no ignorance and no end to ignorance, no old age and death and no end to old age and death, [and here's the amazing part] no suffering, no cause of suffering, no extinguishing, no path, no wisdom and no gain!”

In other words, no Noble Truths. So what's going on here? Well, let's go back to the beginning.

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, doing deep prajna paramita, clearly saw emptiness of all the five conditions, thus completely relieving misfortune and pain.

And we could almost stop right there. This first sentence is kind of the ultra, super, extra concentrated version of this already condensed teaching. "Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, doing deep prajna paramita, clearly saw emptiness of all the five conditions, thus completely relieving misfortune and pain." Buddhism in a nutshell. But there's a lot in

that nutshell, so let's unpack it a little.

A bodhisattva is an almost-enlightened being, one who postpones her or his own entry into Nirvana in order to first help all other sentient beings on their journeys. You might think of them as demi-gods, or guardian angels, or spiritually advanced beings who have vowed to help everyone and everything in the world wake up to its own Buddha-nature. Avalokiteshvara is one of these almost-enlightened beings.

In fact, Avalokiteshvara is one of the most important of the bodhisattvas. Known in Japan as Kannon and in China as Kuan-Yin, Avalokiteshvara is the Sanskrit name for the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Depending on how her name is rendered, it means "She Who Hears the Cries of the World," or "The One Who Looks Down on the World Like a Mother Nursing Her Child." According to Tibetan Buddhism, each successive Dalai Lama is the incarnation of Avalokiteshvara.

So Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is doing deep prajna paramita. In Buddhist teaching there are six paramitas, or perfections, or practices: dana (generosity), shila (discipline), kshanti (patience), virya (effort), dhyana (meditation), and prajna (wisdom). So Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is doing deep prajna paramita, deep wisdom practice, and from this deep wisdom place she clearly saw emptiness in all the five conditions.

Now let me just pause here for a minute. Are you starting to get the idea that Buddhism is a complex tradition? Six paramitas, five conditions, an eightfold path; Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, all this stuff in Sanskrit . . . Apparently there's a lot more to it than just being mindful and watching your breath. Well, every tradition has both complex and simplified expressions, and each can help make sense of the other. The details often provide the background, the context, for the simpler version, and the simpler version often gives meaning to the details. Both are important. So let's get back to the details.

According to Buddhist teaching there are five elements which make up our sense of self. These are the "five conditions." They are: our physical form, our sensations, our perceptions of those sensations, our mental formations, and our consciousness or, in the translation we're looking at, form, sensation, conception, discrimination, and awareness. So, according to the Heart Sutra, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, doing deep wisdom practice, clearly saw that each of these five conditions was fundamentally empty. And with that we arrive at the second most important question of the morning. What does "emptiness" mean?

Let's take a look at form—our physical self; our material, corporeal existence; what Buddhists poetically call "this bag of skin." Are you your body? Is what I think of as "me" the same thing as my body? What if, while handling my manuscript this morning, I suffered a severe paper cut and managed to lop off one of my fingers or my whole arm—would I be any less me with fewer protuberances?

Or let's look at it another way. What makes up our bodies? Skin, bones, hair, blood, miscellaneous fluids. Is any of that "me"? And aren't all those things made up of cells, which are made up of molecules, which are made up of atoms, which are made up of

electrons and protons? If you really look at your body what you see is a bunch of electrons and protons and a whole lot of empty space. Well, where is the "you" in all of that?

Tich Nhat Hanh puts it this way: if you look at a cookie, it is made up of wheat, sugar, eggs, butter, and maybe a chocolate chip or two, but there's no "cookie" in a cookie. In other words, a cookie is made up entirely of non-cookie elements. And it turns out that if you look closely enough, all things are made up entirely of non-thing elements. There is no "tree" in a tree; no "car" in a car; no "organ" in an organ—biological or musical. It turns out that no thing exists independently, in and of itself, irreducible like a prime number. Everything is made up of other things. Fundamentally, then, you could say that there are no "things," and this "no-thing-ness" (or nothingness) is what Buddhists call emptiness.

Modern physics tells us pretty much the same thing. This lectern appears to me to be a piece of solid wood, but essentially, at the level of essentials, it's really just protons and electrons swirling around. And they're swirling around suspiciously close to the protons and electrons which make up what I think of as "my body." At that level, it's hard to tell where "me" ends and "the lectern" begins because, at that level, both the wood and I are just energy patterns. "Wood-ness" and "me-ness" do not exist outside of my perception of those energy patterns.

So, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, while deeply engaged in wisdom practice, suddenly realized that she was not her body, that "form" was "empty" of any essential self. Likewise, she saw that all five conditions were also empty—sensation, conception, discrimination, awareness, "she" was not to be found in any of them. And now we address the most important question of the morning—the most important question in any sermon, actually: So what?

We all have certain assumptions about how the world works, how the universe is put together, and we live our lives looking at things through the lens of these assumptions. And, whether we articulate it or not, we try to understand how the universe is put together so that we can live our lives in such a way as to maximize the good stuff and minimize the bad stuff. But bad stuff—or maybe I should say, less pejoratively, difficult, challenging stuff—keeps happening to us anyway. Typically, this leads to one of three responses.

First, we might try to improve our approach to life, try to more fully live in accord with our assumptions. If I think that the universe is organized around material existence, I might try to get more or better stuff. If I think that the universe is organized around mental existence, I might try to learn more or different kinds of things. If I think that the universe is organized around moral existence, I might try to double my efforts to be a good person. Of course, at some point, things inevitably go wrong again and I have to try once more to improve my approach.

A second response, when faced with life's challenges, is to turn cynical, to stop trying, to take for granted that things won't work out, and to set my expectations as low as they can

go.

The third response—and the one recommended by Buddhism and by all the religious traditions I have ever heard of—is to question the fundamental assumptions I was using to try to make sense of my life. Maybe I'm struggling so much because the universe isn't organized around what I have, or what I think, or what I do.

In the months and, no doubt years, to come I hope we'll explore some of these understandings, these assumptions about the world, that may not be as true as we think they are. This morning I want to look at one which, I'd wager most of us share, whether we would put it quite this way or not: the idea that I am contained—that what is essentially "me" is contained—within this bag of skin, this form over here and that you are something over there, other and separate. As they used to begin the news on Saturday Night Live, "Good evening. I'm Chevy Chase, and you're not." I'm me and you're you. It seems so obvious that we don't even usually think about it.

But Avalokiteshvara was thinking about it, thinking about it deeply, and came to the conclusion that this basic, obvious assumption is wrong. She realized that fundamentally, essentially, there is no separate "me"—that at my core there is no thing that is separately, independently "Erik. Likewise, there is no "you." At the heart of things there is no-thing, nothing, emptiness. Form is emptiness. Sensation, conception, discrimination, awareness are emptiness. Color, sound, smell, taste, touch, phenomena; ignorance, wisdom, birth, old age, death, suffering. Avalokiteshvara realized that there are no such things, realized that all of it is, fundamentally, emptiness.

I don't want to try to convince you of this today. That wouldn't be very UU of me. It wouldn't be very Buddhist, either. Buddhism, like Unitarian Universalism, is all about our discovering this, realizing this, for ourselves. But in the time remaining I do want to look at something that might come from such a realization.

For Avalokiteshvara, this realization completely relieved "all misfortune and pain." When you realize that there is no "I" who is left to feel pain? When you see that "I" and the things that happen to me are not separate, where is the misfortune?

But there is something else which flows from this realization, something that is frequently overlooked. If my two hands assume that each is a separate being, and one of them drops into a fire, the other might hesitate for a moment before helping. After all, there would be risks involved; it might get hurt in the process; my left hand would have something to lose by going to help the right one. But if the two hands realize that they are not fundamentally separate, that they are part of the same body, there is no hesitation. The left hand immediately reaches out to help the right because there is no difference between them.

As long as I believe that I am "me" and you are "you" there is reason for me to pause when I see you in need. I have to ask: what are the risks to me in helping? What do I stand to lose? Yet if I realize that there is no "me" and there is no "you," I also realize that there is no separation. I realize that we are one, and there is no more hesitation. Like

Avalokiteshvara I perform works of compassion with no more deliberate effort than it takes to grow my hair; I reach out to help as one reaches out to fix the pillow behind their head while falling asleep. It is effortless, reflexive. People like this are the ones who truly, honestly, don't realize they've done anything even though they've just saved your life.

Buddhist emptiness does not point to the idea that nothing exists, but that no separation exists. The Heart Sutra does not tell me that I don't exist, but that I don't exist the way I think I do—separate, alone. It encourages me to see things at the level where we are all just energy patterns swirling suspiciously close to one another, the level at which it's hard to tell where "me" leaves off and "you" begins. That's the level Avalokiteshvara was looking at when she had her realization of emptiness, and for her it completely relieved all misfortune and pain. What might it do for you?

Meditation: I invite you to close your eyes. Relax. Take a deep breath, and release it. Now imagine what it would be like if you fully accepted this realization, fully integrated it into your life. Breathe in, and know that the whole world is breathing in. Breathe out, and know that everyone and everything is exhaling. Know—don't just think, but know—that you are one with those you love, with the people sitting next to you, with those who present you with your greatest challenges, with everything that is. How would your life be different if this was how you lived? What would have to change? How would you change? And what stands in your way?

Closing Words: Let us cultivate boundless goodwill. Let none deceive another, or despise any being in any state. Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm. Even as a mother watches over her child, so with boundless mind should one cherish all living beings, radiating friendliness over the whole world, above, below, and all around, without limit.

~ from the *Metta Sutta*