

Transcript of teachings by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi on the *Heart Sutra and Stages of the Path* (the Six Perfections)

Root text: *The Heart of Wisdom Sutra* by Shakyamuni Buddha, translation Gelong Thubten Tsultrim (George Churinoff). Extracted from *Essential Buddhist Prayers: An FPMT Prayer Book, Volume 1*. Copyright: FPMT, Inc. 2008.

Lesson 5

9 July 2013

Review of importance of realising selflessness. Beginning of commentary on *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*. Meaning of the name. Etymological divisions. Prologue. The blessing. Shariputra's question.

Question: A specific perfection is associated with each of the ten grounds and we were told that there are very special qualities and practices associated with each of these perfections. Will we be covering these later? Why is a certain perfection practised on each ground? When the bodhisattvas are in post-meditative equipoise are they not practising all these perfections?

Answer: The presentation on the perfections will come later when we look at the deeds of the bodhisattvas that are part of the path of the persons of great capacity in the lam-rim.

Although a perfection is associated with each of the ten grounds, it does not mean that the bodhisattvas only practise generosity and not the other perfections on the first ground. The bodhisattvas on the first ground practise all the perfections. It is just that their practice of the perfection of generosity on the first ground becomes very special and highly developed. On the first ground, the bodhisattvas' practice of the perfection of generosity exceeds their practice of ethics.

When the bodhisattvas move on to the second ground, they achieve the perfection of ethics. On the second ground, their practice of ethics becomes very developed. While they were on the first ground, the bodhisattvas do also practise ethics but it is only at the second ground that their practice of ethics becomes very developed.

Let us look at the practice of the perfection of wisdom by a bodhisattva superior. From the first to the sixth ground, the bodhisattva enters meditative equipoise when he meditates on emptiness. In meditative equipoise he realises emptiness directly. But from the first to the fifth grounds, the bodhisattva does not have the ability yet to enter into meditative equipoise on emptiness and then arise from that meditative equipoise in an instant. An instant is like one finger-snap. So from the first to the fifth grounds, the bodhisattva cannot enter meditative equipoise at will and arise from that meditative equipoise in such a short time as a finger-snap.

On the sixth ground however, the bodhisattva achieves the special practice of wisdom, the perfection of wisdom, such that, with great ease and in an instant, he can

enter meditative equipoise. He can also arise from that meditative equipoise instantly. This becomes easy for him whereas before achieving the sixth ground, he would find this difficult to do. This is the explanation of how the bodhisattvas' practice of wisdom is extremely developed and special when they achieve the sixth ground.

The reason why a perfection is related to each of the ten grounds is to show that, on these respective grounds, the bodhisattvas attain a very special kind of practice related to the perfection of that ground. So coming back to your question, it is not that prior to the first ground, the bodhisattvas are not practising generosity.

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### **IMPORTANCE OF REALISING SELFLESSNESS**

As we saw in the previous module, all the four Buddhist tenets assert that it is very important to understand and to realise the view of selflessness. All the four Buddhist tenets are the same in asserting that one must realise selflessness.

Why do all the Buddhist tenets assert that the view of selflessness is so very important? Because all the Buddhist tenets assert that the root of samsara, the root of all our problems, lies in our ignorance. Although the four Buddhist tenets differ as to what this ignorance is exactly, they all assert that it is ignorance that is the root of cyclic existence, the root of every undesirable thing and outcome, the root of all suffering.

All the four Buddhist tenets also assert that the sole antidote to this ignorance is the realisation of selflessness. Only the wisdom realising selflessness can destroy our apprehension of the self that is the root of all our problems. Therefore realising selflessness is extremely important.

As I mentioned in the previous lesson, when we come to understand for ourselves, from the heart, that the root of all our problems lies in our ego-grasping, the apprehension of a self, on that basis, we will come to understand that the sole antidote and the only solution to this is the wisdom realising selflessness.

When you understand that our founder, Buddha Shakyamuni, has revealed this path of selflessness, when you put all this together and see this for yourself, only then will you develop an unparalleled faith in the Buddha. Then you can see that the Buddha is indeed very special, that he is in a class of his own and completely in a different league compared to the founders of other religions or philosophical systems. Only then will you be able to differentiate between the Buddha and the founders of other religious traditions and philosophical views. Among all the religions and philosophies that are found in this world, it is only in Buddhism that the view of selflessness is taught. There is no other religious traditions that talk about non-self.

This is the reason why the Buddha talked about the benefits of even reading a sutra or a treatise that has selflessness as its subject matter. The Buddha talked about the great benefits of listening to, reading, writing out or explaining such texts to others.

When you think about why there are such benefits, it comes down to what we said earlier—the view of selflessness is the only antidote to the root of all our problems, the apprehension of a self.

There are different quotations from the sutras that talk about the benefits of listening to teachings on emptiness. One accumulates so much merit simply by listening to the teachings. On top of that, when one reflects on the meaning of what one has heard, the merit that one accumulates is even greater than simply listening to the teachings. On top of that, when one is able to meditate or familiarise oneself with what one has already ascertained from one's reflections, the merit derived from such meditation on emptiness is greater still.

The great Indian master Aryadeva said, “At the time of small merit, i.e., for those who have small merit, with regard to this Dharma, the teachings on selflessness, one does not generate profound doubt. However, even if one merely generates doubt, that doubt will tear apart cyclic existence.”

The doubt that the great Indian master Aryadeva was referring to is the doubt tending towards the factual. You will recall from the *lo-rig* module that there are different kinds of doubt. Here we are not talking about having even an understanding or realisation of emptiness, but just to start entertaining the doubt that tends towards the factual with regard to emptiness, that doubt can start to shake your entire samsara.

While there is great benefit to be gained from learning and reflecting on selflessness and it is important to do this, one must remember to do all this with the correct motivation. Having the right motivation is extremely important.

The main reason why the Buddha gave different kinds of teachings, such as the teachings on emptiness and so forth, is to help us to achieve liberation from samsara and to achieve full enlightenment. In order to achieve liberation from samsara and to achieve full enlightenment, we have to destroy our ignorance with the view of selflessness. Without the view of selflessness, without understanding and realising selflessness, it is not possible to tame and destroy the afflictions so it is the method for us to overcome our afflictions.

Therefore we should keep this in mind as our motivation whenever we have the opportunity to learn or even just to read for instance this *Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*. The motivation should be this—to be able to gain the understanding and realisation of selflessness so that one can destroy the afflictions. By doing this, one achieves liberation from samsara and full enlightenment. So it is extremely important to have a pure motivation and a very expansive mind when studying such a subject.

The Buddha taught selflessness in order to give us the antidote to destroy our ignorance, the apprehension of a self, so that we can attain liberation from suffering and achieve full enlightenment. This was the main purpose of the Buddha. Likewise when we educate ourselves, when we listen, learn and reflect on emptiness, it is extremely important to do so with a correct motivation. The motivation has to be the

desire to destroy our afflictions with the view of selflessness so that we can achieve liberation from samsara and achieve full enlightenment. It is important to have the correct motivation and to set a big goal. When your motivation is small, your mind is small and your perspective is small, the result would likewise be small.

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THE MEANING OF THE NAME OF THE SUTRA

The actual *Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* starts with stating the title or name of the sutra in Sanskrit, *Bhagavati Prajnaparamita Hridaya*. In many of the Great Treatises and in the Tibetan translation of the sutras, the title of the text is usually first stated in Sanskrit.

There are different reasons for doing so. One of the reasons for doing so is that the Buddha taught, for example, this *Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* in the Sanskrit language. Expressing the title of the sutra in Sanskrit is a way of expressing the preciousness of this particular language. By expressing the title in Sanskrit, it places an imprint in the reader's mind to be able to know Sanskrit in the future. It is also a cause for receiving blessings in the mind.

The title in Sanskrit is *Bhagavati Prajnaparamita Hridaya*:

- When translated in Tibetan, *Bhagavati* is *chom dän dä*.
- In English *Bhagavati* or *chom dän dä* means, "The fully endowed destroyer, the one gone beyond." In terms of gender, generally speaking, *Bhagavan* is male and *Bhagavati* is female.
- *Prajna* is wisdom.
- *Paramita* is perfection.
- *Hridaya* is essence or the heart.

Paramita literally means, "Gone to the other side." One can look at "gone to the other side" from the perspective of the act of going to the other side or from the perspective of the act of having arrived at the other side.

- From the perspective of the act of going to the other side, this is from the perspective of a learner, someone who is travelling towards full enlightenment.
- From the perspective of the act of having arrived at the other side, this is from the perspective of someone who is a buddha.

There is some discussion as to whether perfection exists on the buddha ground or not. Some say that it does exist. There is also a discussion with regard to the learner's paths as to whether the perfections exist or not. From the perspective of the CMWS, the conclusion is that you could say that the perfections exist in the learner's paths. When you look at the presentation of the paths and grounds, the perfections are explained, starting from the first ground, e.g., there is an explanation of the perfection of generosity on the first ground and so forth.

ETYMOLOGICAL DIVISIONS

There are different etymological divisions of the perfection of wisdom:

1. The natural perfection of wisdom: The natural perfection of wisdom is the emptiness of the mind. You may have heard of the terms *natural nirvana* and the *tathagathagarbha*, the tathagatha essence. These are all talking about the emptiness of the mind. The natural perfection of wisdom that refers to the emptiness of the mind is not the actual perfection of wisdom. It is just a nominal or an etymological division of the perfection of wisdom.
2. The textual perfection of wisdom: Texts that have emptiness as their main subject matter are called *the textual perfection of wisdom*.
3. The path perfection of wisdom: The wisdom realising emptiness in the continua of bodhisattvas is *the path perfection of wisdom*. The path perfection of wisdom is an actual perfection of wisdom.
4. The resultant perfection of wisdom: *The resultant perfection of wisdom* is the omniscient wisdom.

The title of this sutra, *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, is derived from its main subject matter. It is called *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* because its main subject matter is emptiness and the wisdom realising emptiness. I mentioned before that, of all the types of wisdom, the wisdom realising emptiness is the supreme.

PROLOGUE

Thus did I hear at one time. The Bhagavan was dwelling on Mass of Vultures Mountain in Rajagriha together with a great community of monks and a great community of bodhisattvas.

This is the prologue. In this section of the prologue, there are four perfect factors:

1. perfect time
2. perfect teacher
3. perfect place
4. perfect entourage (or congregation)

1. Perfect time

This is indicated by the first sentence of the sutra, “Thus did I hear at one time.”

“Thus did I hear” means that the teaching was heard directly from Buddha Shakyamuni himself and not from a third party.

“At one time” shows that this teaching was heard only once. This also indicates how rare it was to be able to hear the teachings on the perfection of wisdom. It can also mean that the listener was of very sharp wisdom because, just by hearing it once, he remembered everything.

The sutra starts with, “Thus did I hear ...” Who was the listener exactly, the one who heard? It gets a little complicated here when you think about who this person may be.

Khen Rinpoche: Any ideas? There were millions of disciples. It cannot be everyone but it must be someone.

The “I” here would probably refer to the person who compiled the teachings.

~ *Compilation of the teachings of the Buddha*

Historically after the Buddha passed away into paranirvana, it is said that three councils were convened to compile the teachings of the Buddha by writing them down from memory.

When we talk about the compilation of the teachings of the Buddha, there was the compilation of the Hinayana teachings but we also have to talk about the Mahayana teachings. This is somewhat complicated.

What is commonly known now is that there was an event compiling the Hinayana teachings or what is commonly known as *the Pali canon*. This first compilation, sponsored by King Ajatashatru, was done a year after the Buddha passed away into parinirvana. Many arhats came together to compile the teachings, the primary ones being Ananda, Mahakashyapa and Upali. Ananda was responsible for compiling the sutra pitaka, Mahakashyapa was responsible for compiling the abhidharma pitaka and Upali was responsible for compiling the vinaya pitaka.

The second compilation happened about a hundred years after the Buddha passed away into paranirvana. The main sponsor for this second compilation of the teachings of the Buddha’ teachings was King Ashoka.

What about the compilations of the Mahayana teachings? When was it done and who did it? According to the explanations that are available, the compilation of the Mahayana teachings took place one week after the Buddha’s paranirvana. The main compilers were Manjushri, Vajrapani and Maitreya. It was said that there was an assembly of one million bodhisattvas when the Mahayana teachings were compiled.

~ *Three scriptural collections*

Of the three Mahayana scriptural collections:

- Manjushri compiled the Abhidharma Pitaka.
- Maitreya compiled the Vinaya Pitaka.
- Vajrapani compiled the Sutra Pitaka.

Which pitaka does *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* belong to? What if I were to say to you that it is not the Sutra Pitaka, that it belongs to the Abhidharma Pitaka?

Khen Rinpoche: You would have to say, “No.” Of course you have to say “No.”

Which scriptural collection does *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* falls into? This is something for you to think about.

How are the three scriptural collections differentiated? I think I mentioned this quite a while ago.

- The main subject matter of the Vinaya Pitaka is the higher training in ethics.
- The main subject matter of the Sutra Pitaka is the higher training in concentration.
- The main subject matter of the Abhidharma Pitaka is the higher training in

wisdom.

The ancient translators of the past devised a system to help readers identify the scriptural collection to which a particular text belonged. This distinction is made on the basis of the object of homage.

- At the beginning of the text, if homage is paid to the Omniscient One, “I prostrate to the Omniscient One,” that text belongs to the Vinaya Pitaka.
- If the text belongs to the Sutra Pitaka, homage is paid to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, “I prostrate to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas.”
- If the text belongs to the Abhidharma Pitaka, homage is paid to Manjughosha, “I prostrate to Manjughosha.”

THREE MAHAYANA PITAKAS	COMPILER	MAIN SUBJECT MATTER	OBJECT OF HOMAGE (at the beginning of the translated text)	
Vinaya	Maitreya	Higher training in ethics.	The Omniscient One.	I prostrate to the Omniscient One.
Sutra	Vajrapani	Higher training in concentration.	All the buddhas and bodhisattvas.	I prostrate to all the buddhas & bodhisattvas.
Abhidharma	Manjushri	Higher training in wisdom.	Manjughosha.	I prostrate to Manjughosha.

Who compiled *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*? Once you settle which scriptural collection this sutra belongs, you would be able to figure out its compiler. This particular sutra could only fall into either the Sutra Pitaka or the Abhidharma Pitaka. Based on that, the compiler would be either Vajrapani or Manjushri. We cannot say for sure but *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* could belong to the Sutra Pitaka and in that case, the compiler of the sutra would be Vajrapani.

2. Perfect teacher

The sutra continues with, “The Bhagavan ...” The “Bhagavan” refers to the perfect teacher. The Tibetan translation of “Bhagavan” is *chom dän dä*:

- *Chom* means “to destroy.” As a noun, it is the destroyer because the Buddha is someone who has destroyed the afflictions and the knowledge obscurations.
- *Dän* means “to possess.” The Buddha is someone who has destroyed all the unfavourable opposing factors, i.e., the afflictions together with the knowledge obscurations. The Buddha is thus endowed with or possesses all the good qualities.
- *Dä* means “to pass or to go beyond.” This word is not in the original Sanskrit word, *Bhagavan*, literally but its meaning is implied. In the Tibetan translation, *dä* is there, meaning to pass or to go beyond. This means that the Buddha has gone beyond the extremes of samsara and nirvana. *Dä* can also mean that the Buddha is superior to ordinary or worldly gods.

TIBETAN TRANSLATION OF BHAGAVAN IS <i>CHOM DÄN DÄ</i>		
<i>Chom</i>	To destroy.	The Buddha is someone who has destroyed the afflictions and the knowledge obscurations.

TIBETAN TRANSLATION OF BHAGAVAN IS <i>CHOM DĀN DĀ</i>		
<i>Dān</i>	To possess.	The Buddha possesses all the good qualities as he is someone who has destroyed all the afflictions together with the knowledge obscurations.
<i>Dā</i>	To pass or go beyond.	The Buddha has gone beyond the extreme of samsara and the extreme of nirvana. It also means that the Buddha is superior to the ordinary or worldly gods.

3. Perfect place

The Bhagavan was dwelling on Mass of Vultures Mountain in Rajagriha together with a great community of monks and a great community of bodhisattvas.

“Mass of Vultures Mountain” is the perfect place. There are many interpretations as to what “Mass of Vultures” means. One interpretation is that it is a place where many vultures gathered. Another interpretation is that the shape of the mountain resembles the shape of the head of a vulture. In some texts, it is mentioned that, during the time when the Buddha was teaching this sutra, many bodhisattvas came to listen to the teachings in the aspect or form of vultures. But this does not really matter because this is a non-essential point.

4. Perfect entourage

“Together with a great community of monks and a great community of bodhisattvas” shows the perfect entourage or congregation. “A great community of monks”: The monks here refer to the hearer foe destroyers and the solitary realiser foe destroyers, i.e., the arhats. “A great community of bodhisattvas” refers to the bodhisattvas.

This means that the disciples of *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* were the hearers, solitary realisers and the bodhisattvas.

So this prologue indicates:

- the time when the sutra was taught
- who the teacher was
- the place where the teaching was given
- who was present at the teaching

THE BLESSING

At that time, the Bhagavan was absorbed in the concentration on the categories of phenomena called “Profound Perception”.

Here there is a discussion of the blessing: Who was conferring the blessing? Who received the blessing? How was the blessing given?

- The Buddha conferred blessing while he remained in meditative equipoise, i.e. while he remained in concentration.
- What kind of concentration was the Buddha absorbed in? It is the concentration on the categories of phenomena called “Profound Perception.”
- What was the object that the Buddha was focussing on while he was in meditative equipoise? The object was emptiness.

- What was the mind that was placed in this meditative equipoise focusing on emptiness? It is a concentration called “Profound Perception.”

What this means is that the Buddha was in meditative equipoise focusing on emptiness and he conferred blessing, while in meditative equipoise, remaining in this concentration called “Profound Perception”.

Who was the person that was blessed by the Buddha? The person that the Buddha blessed was Shariputra.

What did his blessing do to Shariputra? This will come later in the sutra. Basically Shariputra was blessed by the Buddha to engage in a question and answer session with Avalokiteshvara.

How was the blessing done?

Also, at that time, the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara looked upon the very practice of the profound perfection of wisdom and beheld those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature.

This is said to be the cause of the question that Shariputra will ask later. While Buddha was in meditative equipoise, Avalokiteshvara was also in meditative equipoise where he, “looked upon the very practice of the profound perfection of wisdom and beheld those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature.” This section of the sutra that we have just read shows the condition for Shariputra to pose his question. The condition is Avalokiteshvara being in meditative equipoise.

Khen Rinpoche: I think Chenrezig was meditating and Shariputra was wondering what he was meditating on. What kind of meditation was he doing? Maybe it was like that. He was curious. When you do not meditate, no one will ask you any questions. If you are just sitting around, nobody will ask you what you are doing.

SHARIPUTRA'S QUESTION

Then, through the power of Buddha, the venerable Shariputra said this to the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara: “How should any son of the lineage train who wishes to practice the activity of the profound perfection of wisdom?”

“Then, through the power of Buddha, the venerable Shariputra said this to the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara”: This shows that Shariputra did not ask the question through his own volition, from his own side. Rather he asked his question through the power of the Buddha.

At this particular point of the sutra, it says, “How should any son of the lineage train ...” It does not say, “How should any son of the lineage or daughter of the lineage ...”

This is it for today. This is the question of Shariputra. The answer will come later.

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*Question:* The entourage is a noble entourage made up of arhats and bodhisattvas. What is the purpose of emphasising that the question Shariputra posed did not come of his own volition but through the blessing of the Buddha? There must be a reason for doing this.

*Answer:* Shariputra was abiding in the aspect of a hearer but the question he asked was a question about the practice of the bodhisattvas, “How does the bodhisattvas train in the perfection of wisdom starting from the path of accumulation and so forth?” As he was abiding in the aspect of a hearer, he could not have asked the question through his own volition because he was asking a question about the bodhisattva path. Perhaps this could be the reason why he asked the question through the power of Buddha.

*Khen Rinpoche:* I don’t know. Maybe it is like that.

I don’t know exactly but I am speculating that it is because Shariputra was a hearer that he was unable to ask a question pertaining to the practice of the perfection of wisdom on a bodhisattva path. I can’t say. I really don’t know. I wonder why he couldn’t ask the question through his own volition. Why did he have to be blessed?

*Khen Rinpoche:* Hup Cheng (name of student) said that it is because he was Buddha’s pet that is why Buddha gave him the blessing! This is Hup Cheng’s answer.

*Good. Have more questions and answers. I don’t know what the right answer is, so you can find out more. That is good.*



Summary of lesson for reference purposes only:

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|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Thus did I hear                                                                                                                        | The teaching was heard directly from Buddha Shakyamuni himself and not from a third party.                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| At one time                                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This teaching was only heard once indicating the rarity of being able to hear teachings on the perfection of wisdom.</li> <li>• It can also mean that the listener is of very sharp wisdom as simply by hearing it once, he remembered everything.</li> </ul> |
| Thus did I hear at one time                                                                                                            | The perfect time.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| The Bhagavan                                                                                                                           | The perfect teacher.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Mass of Vultures Mountain                                                                                                              | The perfect place.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Together with a great community of monks and a great community of bodhisattvas                                                         | The perfect entourage or congregation.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| A great community of monks                                                                                                             | The hearer foe destroyers and the solitary realiser foe destroyers, i.e., the arhats.                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| A great community of bodhisattvas                                                                                                      | The bodhisattvas.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| At that time, the Bhagavan was absorbed in the concentration on the categories of phenomena called “Profound Perception”.              | The Buddha conferred blessing on Shariputra while in meditative equipoise focusing on emptiness and remaining in the concentration called “Profound Perception”. The blessing caused Shariputra to engage in a question and answer session with Avalokiteshvara.                                       |
| Also, at that time, the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara looked upon the very practice of the profound perfection of wisdom | This shows the condition for Shariputra’s question. While Buddha was in meditative equipoise, Avalokiteshvara was also in meditative equipoise where he “looked upon the very practice of the profound perfection of wisdom and beheld those                                                           |

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| and beheld those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature.                                                                                                                                                                            | five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature.” After this, Shariputra will pose his question.                                                        |
| Then, through the power of Buddha, the venerable Shariputra said this to the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara: “How should any son of the lineage train who wishes to practice the activity of the profound perfection of wisdom?” | Shariputra did not ask the question merely through his own volition, but rather he asked the question of Avalokiteshvara due to the power of the Buddha. |

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