

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 9

23 July 2013

Review of path perfection of wisdom. Greatness of the mantra. The summary. Three categories of the speech of the Buddha.

Question: It was mentioned earlier that *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* should belong to the Sutra Pitaka, that is related to the higher training of concentration. I cannot understand why this is so because it seems to me that this sutra is talking about the practice of the perfection of wisdom.

Also why is the Buddha using this method of question and answer between Shariputra and Avalokiteshvara rather than expounding the teachings directly himself. In other sutras that we have read, arhats and bodhisattvas would question the Buddha and the Buddha would answer directly. Is there a special reason why there is this question and answer format? Does it serve a specific purpose?

Answer: As I mentioned before, it is said that *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* is included in the Sutra Pitaka. Is it all right to say that *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* falls into the Sutra Pitaka?

In general, if the main subject matter of the sutra deals with the higher training of concentration, it falls into the Sutra Pitaka. But the subject matter of *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* is the wisdom realising emptiness. Can we say that the subject matter of *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* is also about concentration? This is something that needs further thought.

I am not saying 100% that *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* falls into the Sutra Pitaka. We need to think about this. Perhaps there are people who we can ask about this.

In order to appreciate this question and for the question to come about, you must have an understanding of a few things:

- First, you must know how the three scriptural collections are classified, i.e. how they are classified according to their subject matter.
- The second thing is that you have to know that, in general, *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* is included in the Sutra Pitaka.
- The third thing is that when you look at *The Heart of Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, you could almost be certain that the subject matter is the higher training of

wisdom.

When you put all these three things together, you will have the question, “Why is *The Heart the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* included in the Sutra Pitaka?”

The Heart of Perfection of Wisdom Sutra involves questions and answers between Avalokiteshvara and Shariputra. Both of them spoke due to the blessings of the Buddha. You could ask, “Why doesn’t the Buddha say everything himself? Why does he have to start this with two people talking to one another?” There is no straightforward answer for this question. You have to think about it.

Khen Rinpoche: I give you an example. Someone wants to ask a question but instead of asking directly himself, he gets the person sitting next to him to ask. So the blessing is from the first party, not from the person posing the question. Many people do that. I don’t know why they do that. Maybe Buddha said something like that, “Shariputra, you ask.”

It is possible that the Buddha did what he did in *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* because of the disposition and inclination of his disciples, the objects to be subdued. The purpose of the teachings of the Buddha is to benefit sentient beings and he does so in accordance with their dispositions and inclinations.

It is possible that, in this case, for whatever reason, the Buddha knew that it was perhaps more beneficial for the disciples if the teachings were given in this way, as a conversation or dialogue between these two persons. The dialogue was inspired by the Buddha himself.

Khen Rinpoche: Sometimes when people have problems, the person who is helping may not talk to the person needing help directly. He may send a message through another party to tell the latter. Then the problem is solved. So that was a more effective way than the first party giving advice directly to the person. Sometimes this is the best method. You know what to do but if you were to talk directly to the person, it is not effective. So you send your advice through another person. Then that is more effective.

I can’t say for sure if that could be the reason why the Buddha taught *The Heart Sutra* like that. I don’t know but when the Buddha taught, he taught on the basis of knowing the dispositions and the inclinations of his disciples.

There was a question in a previous lesson as to why Shariputra could not ask the question on his own accord but had to be inspired by the Buddha to do so. It is entirely possible that due to Shariputra adopting the aspect of a hearer, he could not pose the question under his own power.

Shariputra was in the aspect of a hearer and Avalokiteshvara was in the aspect of a bodhisattva. In this conversation between a hearer and a bodhisattva, perhaps it could be an attempt to tell everyone, both hearers and those who are of the Mahayana lineage—in fact whatever lineage one belongs to—that in order to achieve their respective enlightenments, one needs to train in this wisdom.

The Buddha taught according to the dispositions, inclinations and abilities of his disciples. You may recall, when we studied tenets in the previous module, that sometimes the Buddha said that phenomena are truly existent. There were also times that the Buddha said that phenomena are not truly existent. He also said that things do not exist by way of their own character, but at other times, he said that things do exist by way of their own character. So the Buddha said all these different things.

So I guess the answer to your question could be this: Because the Buddha taught according to the dispositions, inclinations and abilities of his disciples, the Buddha knew exactly what was most beneficial. In this case, he saw that it was more beneficial to teach through inspiring Shariputra to pose a question to Avalokiteshvara.

Khen Rinpoche: You can also think of what is the best way to answer this question. That is the best answer I can come up with.

*Student: Your teacher¹ had another way of classifying the scriptures. Three types of scriptures were taught: inspired scriptures, scriptures of permission and articulated (or uttered) scriptures. According to him, *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom* falls under inspired scriptures.*

*Answer: In general, the Buddha's speech is divided into three: inspired speech, permitted speech and direct speech, i.e., spoken directly by the Buddha. Most parts of *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* is inspired speech but permitted speech and the direct speech are also in this sutra.*

Question: Can you give an example of a scripture of permission?

Khen Rinpoche: Yes, that is coming soon.

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## **PATH PERFECTION OF WISDOM**

So far we have been talking about the way to train in the perfection of wisdom on the Mahayana path of accumulation, path of preparation, path of seeing and path of meditation. By depending on these paths, one achieves enlightenment. As it says in this sutra, "All the Buddhas who dwell in the three times" achieved enlightenment in reliance on the perfection of wisdom. The perfection of wisdom here refers to the path perfection of wisdom. It refers to the wisdom realising emptiness that is conjoined with the Mahayana mind generation.

It is also mentioned in some commentaries that the path perfection of wisdom is the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness that is conjoined with bodhicitta.

Perhaps it should be all right to posit the perfection of wisdom to be the wisdom

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<sup>1</sup> Khen Rinpoche's teacher, Khensur Rinpoche Lobsang Tsering, was invited to teach *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* in the first cycle of the Basic Program.

realising emptiness that is conjoined with bodhicitta. When you look at this sutra, one trains in the perfection of wisdom in order to achieve enlightenment. The training in the perfection of wisdom starts from the Mahayana path of accumulation and the Mahayana path of preparation. In order to accommodate the training of wisdom on the path of accumulation and path of preparation, perhaps it would be better to say that the path perfection of wisdom refers to the wisdom realising emptiness that is conjoined with bodhicitta, instead of saying that it has to be the wisdom *directly* perceiving emptiness that is conjoined with bodhicitta. So to be a perfection of wisdom, the wisdom realising emptiness has to be conjoined with method.

There are the five paths of the hearers, solitary realisers and the bodhisattvas. All three have their respective paths of seeing: the hearers' path of seeing, the solitary realisers' path of seeing and the Mahayana path of seeing. The individuals who have achieved those three paths realise emptiness directly, but the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness in the continua of the hearers and solitary realisers do not enable them to achieve enlightenment. But it is the same wisdom.

Why is the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness in the continua of the hearers and solitary realisers unable to overcome the knowledge obscurations? Because their wisdom directly perceiving emptiness is not conjoined with method. In order for the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness to act as an antidote to the knowledge obscurations, it must be conjoined with method.

From this you can see that having the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness alone does not necessarily mean that you will eliminate all the obscurations. In order for the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness to be able to eliminate *all* the obscurations, it must be conjoined with method, i.e., it must be conjoined with a huge collection of merit. From this you can understand that you need a huge collection of merit as the support that will enable the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness to act as an antidote to the knowledge obscurations.

In short, the perfection of wisdom refers to the wisdom realising emptiness that is conjoined with method or conjoined with the Mahayana mind generation. From this you can see that, if it is a wisdom realising emptiness, it is not necessarily a perfection of wisdom.

### **GREATNESS OF THE MANTRA**

What follows is showing the greatness of the mantra of the perfection of wisdom. In this context here, the mantra of the perfection of wisdom refers to the path perfection of wisdom. The text is saying that the path perfection of wisdom is a mantra or the wisdom realising emptiness is a mantra.

In Sanskrit, the word *mantra* is made of two syllables, *man* and *tra*. It means *mind protection*, i.e., protecting or saving the mind from fear.

Therefore, the mantra of the perfection of wisdom, the mantra of great knowledge, the unsurpassed mantra, the mantra equal to the

unequaled, the mantra that thoroughly pacifies all suffering, should be known as truth since it is not false.

- “... the mantra of the perfection of wisdom” refers to the wisdom realising emptiness. In English it is translated as perfection, but literally it means *gone* or *crossed over*, out of samsara. So by depending on this wisdom realising emptiness, one crosses the ocean of cyclic existence to the other shore.
- “... the mantra of great knowledge” refers to the wisdom realising emptiness and it is “the mantra of great knowledge” because this wisdom realising emptiness destroys ignorance and its afflictions.
- “... the unsurpassed mantra”: There is no higher path leading to liberation.
- “... the mantra equal to the unequalled”: *the unequalled* or the unparalleled refers to the Buddha. This perfection of wisdom, the mind realising emptiness, makes one equal to the Buddha.
- It is “the mantra that thoroughly pacifies all suffering” because it can pacify all suffering and its causes.
- It “should be known as truth since it is not false” because the perfection of wisdom sees suchness; therefore it is *true* and undeceptive. This wisdom realising emptiness sees the truth—reality as it is—therefore “it is not false.”

#### *Mantra of definitive meaning*

Mantra, in general, refers to mind protection. The mantra here is the path perfection of wisdom, the wisdom realising emptiness. This wisdom realising emptiness protects the mind from the suffering of samsara and its causes. This wisdom realising emptiness is the definitive mantra or the mantra of definitive meaning.

Most people think that mantras are only for recitation. Now you understand what mantra really means. It means protecting the mind from suffering and its causes. Ultimately, the mantras that people recite cannot really save them from suffering. How can the mantras you recite save you from suffering? In order for our minds to be protected from all the fears, the whole variety of sufferings, we have to eliminate the root cause of these sufferings.

All of you have done a fair bit of learning, studying and engaging in the extensive discussions in tenets and so forth. We have repeatedly seen how the source of all our misery and problems can be traced back to our ignorance, the apprehension of a self. The sole antidote to our ignorance can only be the wisdom realising emptiness.

Without this wisdom realising emptiness, we cannot defeat ignorance. When we do not defeat ignorance, we cannot stop all the problems in samsara and samsara itself. The definitive mantra that protects us from suffering is none other than the wisdom realising emptiness. It is not the mantras that we recite. From this you can see the big difference between someone who has studied, as much as possible, the teachings of the Buddha and someone who do not study the teachings but is content to recite mantras. For a person who do not study, when you mention “mantra,” the only thing that comes to their mind is the mantras that they recite. For a person who has studied well and reflected deeply, his or her understanding of “mantra” is so much deeper, more profound and expansive.

The main reason why the Buddha gave all these teachings was to help us overcome the root cause of all our suffering. When you think about and realise this for yourself, then you will see the point behind learning. You will see why it is so important to learn.

Very often people wonder and ask, “Why should I study so much? What is it for? Practice alone is enough.” It is not easy to see the intent of what the Buddha is saying. The core meaning of the teachings of the Buddha requires studying and much thought. Without reflection and analysis, you will not be able to gain an ascertainment of the teachings in your heart. Through learning, reflection and analysis, when you gain an ascertainment of what the Buddha said, “The root of all our problems is this and the solution is this,” I think it makes a huge difference to your practice because it gives weight to the practice. When you are really practising, of course, relatively speaking, compared to other people, your enlightenment will definitely be quicker.

*Khen Rinpoche: So by studying, your enlightenment is faster. You don't think so?*

The mantra of the perfection of wisdom is declared: TADYATHA OM GATE  
GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA.

I have already explained the meaning of the mantra earlier on.<sup>2</sup>

- *Gate* means *go*. The first two “gates” means to go to the path of accumulation and go to the path of preparation.
- *Para* means *other side* and “gate” means *go so*, *paragate* means to go to the other side, i.e., go to the path of seeing.
- *Parasamgate* means go perfectly to the path of meditation.
- *Bodhi* is *enlightenment*. *Bodhi Svaha* means go to enlightenment or to the buddha ground.

One trains in the perfection of wisdom on the path of accumulation and path of preparation. Then on the path of seeing, one sees emptiness directly. On the path of meditation one familiarises oneself with what one has seen on the path of seeing. Through that, one achieves enlightenment on the path of no more learning.

In short, the mantra explains how one progresses on the various paths by depending on the perfection of wisdom. In some commentaries, it is said that the explanation of the training in the perfection of wisdom starting with, “Form is empty. Emptiness is form....and also no non-attainment,” is an extensive explanation on the training in the perfection of wisdom for the trainees of dull faculties.

For the trainees of sharp faculties, there is just the mantra: TADYATHA OM GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA. They only need the mantra.

There are many *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*. There is the extensive, middling and short *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*. The extensive version consists of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* in 100,000 verses in twelve volumes. The middling version consists of

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to lesson 4 of this module.

the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* in 20,000 verses in three or four volumes. The third version, the condensed *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, is in one volume and is commonly known as *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in Eight Thousand Verses*. The subject is the same, whether it is twelve, three or one volume. Why are there these varying lengths? Perhaps it is due to the capacity of the disciple.

Comparing the disciple or the intended recipient of the extensive *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* and the intended recipient of *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in Eight Thousand Verses*, who has the sharper faculty?

You have to think “Who has the sharper faculties?” For those who are of dull faculties, perhaps there is no need to say too much. But for those who are of sharp faculties, they will have the capacity to understand the extensive presentation.

*Khen Rinpoche: Do you get the point?*

In some commentaries, it is mentioned that the condensed presentation of *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* in the form of the mantra is for those who are of sharp faculties. The entire explanation that comes before the mantra is for the trainees of dull faculties. The mere mention of the path of accumulation is sufficient for those who are of sharp faculties whereas for those who are of dull faculties, if you only say, “the path of accumulation,” they will not understand what that entails. They need more explanation.

In general, when a person is able to understand what you are explaining to him or her immediately, you would say that that person is quite sharp. However if you have to repeat the same explanation to another person many times, obviously that other person is not as sharp.

In general, one does not have to explain much to those who are of higher capacity and sharp faculties. Those who need more explanations are generally not as sharp. If that is the case, then for those who can understand *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* and the way of traversing the paths simply by hearing the mantra, one can posit them to be trainees of sharp faculties. Those who need a more elaborate explanation will be trainees of dull faculties.

*Khen Rinpoche* (who removed his glasses to read the text): *There was an ex-abbot who wore eyeglasses. Sometimes when he reads, he would take off his eyeglasses. I used to wonder why as his eyeglasses were supposed to help him see clearly but when he was reading, he would take them off. Now I know why. Until you have the same experience, you really don't know. Sometimes I can't see with the eyeglasses. I can see better without the eyeglasses. The point is that it is because you cannot see clearly that you wear eyeglasses. But now when you need to read, you must take them off.*

## THE SUMMARY

Shariputra, the bodhisattva mahasattva should train in the profound perfection of wisdom like that.

This is the summary.

### THREE CATEGORIES OF THE SPEECH OF THE BUDDHA

Then the Bhagavan arose from that concentration and commended the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara saying: “Well said, well said, son of the lineage, it is like that. It is like that; one should practice the profound perfection of wisdom just as you have indicated; even the tathagatas rejoice.”

The buddhas do not need to arise from meditative equipoise in order to work for the benefit of all sentient beings. It is an uncommon quality of the buddhas that they are able to work for sentient beings while remaining absorbed in meditative equipoise always. In this sutra, the Buddha is simply showing the aspect of arising from his concentration. You may then ask, “Why did the Buddha show the aspect of arising from his concentration?”

Buddha commended Avalokiteshvara by saying, “Well said, well said ....” “Well said” is mentioned twice for emphasis. The Buddha is saying that the way to train in the perfection of wisdom is just as indicated by Avalokiteshvara. He rejoiced in what Avalokiteshvara had said but the Buddha said that he was not the only one rejoicing; all the buddhas of the past, present and future rejoiced in the same way.

The Bhagavan having thus spoken, the venerable Sharadvatiputra, the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara, those surrounding in their entirety along with the world of gods, humans, asuras, and gandharvas were overjoyed and highly praised that spoken by the Bhagavan.

In general, there are three categories of the speech of the Buddha:

1. permitted speech
  2. inspired speech
  3. direct speech
- The prologue and the last paragraph of the sutra—starting from “The Bhagavan having thus spoken...spoken by the Bhagavan.”—is permitted speech. Perhaps the Buddha gave permission that, in the future when the teachings are compiled, one could add the prologue and the conclusion. I guess this is what is meant by permitted speech.
  - The question and answer exchange between Shariputra and Avalokiteshvara is inspired speech.
  - “Then the Bhagavan arose from that concentration...even the tathagatas rejoice.” is direct speech that came from the holy lips of the Buddha.

*Khen Rinpoche: The Heart Sutra is done.*

In the next class, we will review the salient points of *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*. Then we will start on the six perfections in the following class.

Sometimes you will see that the perfection of wisdom is referred to as the mother of the buddhas, the Bhagavati. This refers to the perfection of wisdom, the wisdom realising emptiness. Just as a child cannot be born without a mother, so in order to become a buddha, it is vital that one must generate the wisdom realising emptiness.

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Question: When the bodhisattva is engaged in the method aspect of the path during post-meditative equipoise, is his wisdom realising emptiness conjoined with engaged bodhicitta also considered the path perfection of wisdom?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Going back to the paths and grounds, do we realise the perfections one after the other in a fixed order?

Answer: There is definitely an order in terms of the difficulty of training in each of these perfections. Each perfection is progressively more difficult than the preceding one. The *Lam Rim Chen Mo* explains this very clearly. It gives a few reasons as to why the order of attainment is definite in terms of the practice:

- The training in the perfection of wisdom is preceded by the perfection of concentration. Without concentration, there is no way to develop wisdom.
- In order to have concentration you must have joyous perseverance. You must persevere and work at developing concentration.
- Before achieving concentration you must have patience.
- In order to have patience, you need to engage in the training in ethics or morality. The basis for morality is the mind of giving, i.e., generosity.

We will cover this when we look at the six perfections.

Question: During the meditative equipoise of the uninterrupted path, what are the signs that the bodhisattva has reached the path of release?

Khen Rinpoche: I'm not sure. Does anyone have any ideas? In the path of release, they do not breathe because they are in deep concentration.

Answer: The uninterrupted path and the path of release happen in one meditative equipoise. When the person arises from the meditative equipoise, he starts to breathe again but I am not sure whether he actually breathes when he is in meditative equipoise.

Khen Rinpoche: I don't know. This is a good question. What is the sign on the path of release? You can find out.

Question: Since most of us are of dull faculties, why are we not studying the more extensive *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*?

Khen Rinpoche: First you have to accept that you are of dull faculties. No one accepts that. Everybody thinks, "I am sharp." I should know in a short time. In one class, I should know *The Heart Sutra*.

Question: I'm not sure whether this is an essential or non-essential point. I have always wondered why, in this sutra, it starts off with Shariputra being called Shariputra. Then Avalokiteshevara is said to respond to Sharadvatiputra and this name is used again at the end of the sutra. Is there any significance in the change of how Shariputra is being addressed?

Answer: I'm not exactly sure whether there is any real difference between him being called Shariputra and Sharadvatiputra. There is an explanation for the additional syllable. It has to do with the ancestral name. There is one explanation involving the father and mother. Perhaps it is a non-essential point. It doesn't matter whether it is Shariputra or Sharadvatiputra.

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