

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 10

25 July 2013

Benefits of studying emptiness. How to meditate on *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*. Training on the paths of accumulation and preparation. Training on the path of seeing. Training on the path of meditation.

Question: How does an uninterrupted path remove the obscurations of its particular ground?

Answer: The uninterrupted path of the Mahayana path of seeing is said to be the direct antidote against the intellectually acquired afflictions and its seeds. When we talk about the intellectually acquired afflictions, there are different varieties of them. So how does one uninterrupted path in one meditative equipoise act as an antidote to these varieties of afflictions?

The answer could be this: Think about the practice of patience. When one has a stable or good practice of patience, one will be patient to not just one person and not another, especially when the practice of patience has culminated in the perfection of patience. The person who has achieved the perfection of patience is someone who has conquered anger in relation to every single person. It is not as if he has to practise with one enemy, then move on to the next enemy and so forth. It is not like that.

In *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*, Shantideva, the great bodhisattva, mentioned that the whole world can be covered with thorns but when one wears a pair of shoes, one can walk anywhere.¹

The power behind the first uninterrupted path of the Mahayana path of seeing that acts as the antidote to the intellectually acquired afflictions does not happen suddenly. That power has been built up, starting from the beginning of the path of preparation. There are four stages on the path of preparation: heat, peak, forbearance and supreme mundane qualities. During those stages, the bodhisattva is working hard to gain the mental power and strength to overcome the manifest conception of true existence. As he progresses along the path of preparation, power of his mind becomes stronger. The manifest conception of true existence that is

¹ “Where would I possibly find enough leather/ With which to cover the surface of the earth?/ Yet (wearing) leather just on the soles of my shoes/ Is equivalent to covering the earth with it.” (Verse 13, Chapter 5).

overcome during these four stages becomes increasingly more and more subtle.

When the bodhisattva achieves the direct perception of emptiness, he gains a very clear appearance of emptiness and sees emptiness directly without any intervening mental image. This is the time when the mind becomes powerful enough to destroy the intellectually acquired afflictions and their seeds.

When this bodhisattva realises emptiness directly, this realisation is completely free of all dualistic appearances. All dualistic appearances subside in the perspective of this wisdom. When this bodhisattva newly attains the path of seeing, i.e., when he achieves the path of release of the first ground, at that time, he has completely abandoned the intellectually acquired afflictions and its seeds with a mind that has the power to destroy these afflictions, i.e., the uninterrupted path.

This question is about the uninterrupted path of the path of seeing. This particular uninterrupted path is a wisdom directly perceiving emptiness. This wisdom realising emptiness realises one emptiness related to a specific basis or realises the emptiness that pervades all phenomena?

Khen Rinpoche: What do you think?

We can only say that this is what happens on the path of release. In this case, the intellectually acquired afflictions are abandoned.

What else can we say about the uninterrupted path other than it being a mind powerful enough to destroy the intellectually acquired afflictions? It is not possible to explain exactly what it is because it is completely beyond the scope of the ordinary mind.

It is like the question raised in the previous class regarding the sign when one achieves the path of release. It is not possible to really talk about that. I would think that you will not be able to tell from looking at the external demeanour of that person who is in meditative equipoise.

The teachings give an analogy to describe the uninterrupted path and the path of release:

- The uninterrupted path is like throwing a thief out from the house.
- The path of release is like closing the door after him.

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## **BENEFITS OF STUDYING EMPTINESS**

I guess all of us consider the teachings of the Buddha to be very sacred and precious. The Buddha's teachings consist of the scriptural Dharma and the realisational Dharma. Of the two, the realisational Dharma is more important. But to have the realisational Dharma, first you must depend on the scriptural Dharma. We have discussed this before.

The supreme realisational Dharma is said to be the correct view of the ultimate nature of reality, emptiness, i.e., the wisdom realising emptiness. Having said this, you have to figure out for yourself the reason why this is so. You need to ascertain for yourself that the mind realising emptiness is the supreme or the highest of all realisational Dharma. In order to gain this ascertainment, you have to analyse over and over and over again.

We talked about the different scriptural Dharma. Remember that there was an explanation of the benefits of studying, learning, reflecting and meditating on the perfection of wisdom? It is stated in one sutra that the merit of learning, reflecting, meditating and practising the perfection of wisdom far surpasses the merit of someone who fills the billionfold world system with the seven kinds of jewels and offers them to the buddhas. We have to think about this benefit over and over again.

Of course, in order to understand the benefit, first we have to understand why hearing, reflecting and meditating on the perfection of wisdom is so beneficial. Ultimately, when we hear, study and reflect on the teachings on the perfection of wisdom, we are also learning about dependent origination. By understanding that there are these benefits, by understanding the importance of learning, hearing and reflecting on the perfection of wisdom and then practising it later, effort will follow. The aspiration will come to want to study, learn, analyse and meditate on the perfection of wisdom.

#### *The motivation*

Whenever we have the opportunity to read or recite *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, we have to think, reflect and meditate on it. We should remember why we are doing this. Our motivation has to be to destroy our ignorance and our apprehension of a self, remembering that the Buddha gave this teaching in order to enable sentient beings like us to destroy our ignorance and the apprehension of a self.

With that in mind, when we recite, reflect, learn or meditate on *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* conjoined with the thought, “I am doing this in order to achieve full enlightenment for all living beings,” then the benefit will be very extensive. So always generate a virtuous motivation.

Whenever we recite or think about *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, we can also think, “I am doing this to plant imprints of emptiness in my mind.”

#### *How the merit increases*

The Buddha spoke about the amazing benefits of hearing, reflecting and meditating on emptiness. We accumulate so much merit just by hearing, learning and studying the teachings on emptiness, the teachings on the perfection of wisdom. On top of simply accumulating that information, if we process what we have learnt by critically analysing and thinking about it, of course that merit will supersede the merit we get from just hearing the teachings on emptiness.

Based on our critical analysis and thinking, the merit we gain through whatever knowledge or the meaning of emptiness that we ascertain by depending on

mindfulness and introspection, that merit would supersede the merit that comes from just analysing or reflecting on the perfection of wisdom.

### *Quality of imprints*

We know the threefold activities of hearing, reflection and meditation. Let's say we are engaging in all three activities and the object is the perfection of wisdom. These three activities do plant imprints on the mind but there is a difference in the quality and the stability of those imprints.

- The imprints that are planted on the mind through hearing alone are not long-lasting and are not stable.
- The imprints that are planted on the mind through reflection produce a certain level of knowledge. Comparatively speaking, these imprints are more stable and last longer.
- But the most important imprints that are planted on the mind is through repeatedly familiarising our minds with whatever ascertainment or conviction we have gained. Of the imprints that are planted by the threefold activities, it is the imprints that are planted on the mind through familiarisation, i.e., meditation, that move from life to life, that give hope for our future lives.

Studying, learning and hearing the teachings are important, without which there is nothing to think about. If there is nothing to think about and analyse, then there is nothing to familiarise ourselves with or meditate on. On the basis of the knowledge that is accumulated from hearing, we have to work on analysing and familiarising the mind repeatedly again and again with whatever understanding or conviction that one has gained. This is where we need to put in effort. Please think about the benefits and the merit that you can accumulate from learning, reflecting, familiarising or meditating on the perfection of wisdom.

## **HOW TO MEDITATE ON THE SUTRA**

### *The prologue*

The sutra starts with the 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. At that time, the Bhagavan was absorbed in the concentration on the categories of phenomena called "Profound Perception."

When you recite this section of the sutra, you can bring to mind that the Buddha is a special being. You can think about the qualities of his exalted body, exalted speech and exalted mind. It is this special being who gave this very special teaching on the perfection of wisdom at this particular time to this particular perfect congregation at this perfect place. This is the idea that should come to your mind when you recite this prologue. At this time, you bring to mind the Buddha and generate devotion.

### *Shariputra's question*

Next, Shariputra poses his question to Avalokiteshvara:

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. 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?”

At this point in the sutra, it is not so much about focussing on Shariputra. Instead you can imagine that you are the one who is asking the question. You are the one who is wondering how the perfection of wisdom should be practised. You should have some queries in your mind.

*Khen Rinpoche: So here, you can be Shariputra. Not Shariputra, perhaps. Maybe another putra I think.*

So when you recite this, you should attempt to bring to your mind the meaning of emptiness. Before Shariputra asked his question, Avalokiteshvara, like the Buddha, was also in meditative equipoise reflecting on the perfection of wisdom. That was the condition for Shariputra to ask his question.

## **TRAINING ON THE PATH OF ACCUMULATION AND THE PATH OF PREPARATION**

*The brief explanation*

Then Avalokiteshvara replied:

He said that and the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara said this to the venerable Sharadvatiputra. “Shariputra, any son of the lineage or daughter of the lineage who wishes to practice the activity of the profound perfection of wisdom should look upon it like this, correctly and repeatedly beholding those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature.

“... correctly and repeatedly beholding those five aggregates also ...”: *Beholding* is *ta war* in Tibetan. That literally means to view (but not with your eyes) “those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature.”

Here the five aggregates are qualified by “*also ....*” This means that not only is the ‘I’ that is imputed in dependence on the bases of designation, the aggregates, empty of existing inherently, but the aggregates themselves are also empty of existing inherently.

Having said that, what does it mean when we say the ‘I’ is empty of existing inherently? What does it mean when we say the aggregates are empty of existing inherently? We have to reflect on this. The ‘I’ is empty. The aggregates are empty. They are empty of what? They are empty of inherent existence.

“... correctly and repeatedly beholding those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature” is the brief explanation.

*The detailed explanation*

The next section is the expanded explanation that starts with:

Form is empty. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is also not other than emptiness. In the same way, feeling, discrimination, compositional factors, and consciousness are empty.

In the commentary, this is said to be the training of the perfection of wisdom in the path of accumulation and the path of preparation.

*~ Meditating on the 'I'*

It starts with the form aggregates, “Form is empty. Emptiness is form.” But it would be easier if we use the ‘I’, the person or the self as the subject. Rather than starting with form, we can reflect on this: The ‘I’ is empty. Emptiness is the ‘I’. Emptiness is not other than ‘I’; ‘I’ is also not other than emptiness. This is the reflection on the four features of emptiness on the basis of the ‘I’. This is said to be easier than if we were to start with a phenomenon other than the ‘I’.

After you have done that, perhaps you could then move on to the aggregates and start with the aggregate of form. Form is empty. Emptiness is form and so forth. After you have finished with form, you can move on to the next aggregate. This is why it says, “In the same way, feeling ....” You then reflect on feeling, discrimination, compositional factors and consciousness.

We start with the self, the person or the ‘I’. The ‘I’ is empty. Emptiness is the ‘I’. We recollect our past experiences of our sense of the ‘I’. We can bring to mind an experience when we were feeling very depressed, useless or hopeless. That is when we feel that the ‘I’ is so low, so depressed. There are also times where we feel this ‘I’ is so elevated especially when pride is manifesting. At that time, the sense of ‘I’ is so overwhelming.

Try to recollect those experiences of the sense of the ‘I’. Then analyse the ‘I’ that we are grasping at during those times. Use the ‘I’ to reflect on how the ‘I’ is empty and how emptiness is the ‘I’. If we can do this meditation, it helps us to pacify the very disturbed mind.

“The ‘I’ is empty.” At this time, what we have to reflect on or realise is that the strong sense of ‘I’ that we recollected—whether the ‘I’ was feeling high or low—the ‘I’ we were grasping at does not exist from the side of the body and mind. There is nothing in the body and mind or in the collection of the body and mind that we can point to to be the ‘I’. The ‘I’ does not exist from the side of the aggregates.

How do we think of ourselves when we have this sense of the ‘I’, the person? How does the ‘I’ appear? The ‘I’ obviously appears and we believe that it exists in a certain way. The way it appears for all of us is that the ‘I’ appears to exist from the side of the body and mind. The ‘I’ appears *to be* the body and mind. The ‘I’ is somewhere there from the side of the body and mind. Not only is there such an appearance. We *believe* that is how the ‘I’ exists. We assent completely to that appearance. We grasp at and

apprehend the ‘I’ to be like that. What we have to understand and realise for ourselves is that the ‘I’ does not exist from the side of the aggregates.

By depending on analogies, we can come to understand that there is no ‘I’ from the side of the aggregates. There are different analogies. Do you remember the analogy of mistakenly seeing a coil of rope to be a snake? Due to certain weather conditions, there is the appearance of a snake from the side of the coil of rope. But the reality is that, when you look for the snake on the coil of rope, you will not be able to find a snake on the rope nor will you be able to find a snake among the parts that make up the rope. The individual parts of the rope are not the snake and the collection of the whole coil of rope is not the snake.

In exactly the same way, the ‘I’ cannot be found on the aggregates. The ‘I’ cannot be found among the aggregates. The ‘I’ does not exist from the side of the aggregates. This is an analogy to help us understand that the ‘I’ or self does not exist from the side of the aggregates that are its bases of designation.

We are trying to discover how the ‘I’ does not exist inherently. We are trying to understand and see for ourselves how there is no ‘I’ existing from the side of the aggregates. Although there is such an appearance and we believe in that appearance, in reality, there is no ‘I’ from the side of the aggregates. This is what we are trying to establish. Using the analogy is one way to help us understand that.

Another way to understand this is seeing how things that are dependently originated, based on causes and conditions, are dependent, i.e., not independent and not inherently existent. The Buddha said this in the sutras and Nagarjuna says likewise in his texts. Therefore there is this statement, “Those that are produced from causes and conditions are not produced.” What it means is that phenomena that are produced from causes and conditions are not inherently produced.

The realisation of emptiness on the path of preparation is not a direct realisation in that the mind realising emptiness does not see emptiness directly. Rather it still realises emptiness through an intervening image, technically called the meaning generality of emptiness.

### **TRAINING ON THE PATH OF SEEING**

It is only on the path of seeing that the individual can realise emptiness directly without any intervening meaning generality. The training on the perfection of wisdom on the path of seeing is indicated by the following sentence:

Shariputra, likewise, all phenomena are emptiness; without characteristic; unproduced, unceased; stainless, not without stain; not deficient, not fulfilled.

This is talking about the eight characteristics or features of emptiness.

“... all phenomena are emptiness”: This is talking about the nature or entity of all phenomena. The ultimate nature of all phenomena is emptiness, i.e., they are empty

of inherent existence. In addition to that, the causes of phenomena themselves do not exist inherently and the effects that are produced are also not inherently produced, i.e., there is no inherent production. In short, not only is the ultimate nature of phenomena emptiness but their causes and effects also do not exist inherently. So here it is talking about the emptiness of inherently existent entities, causes and results.

**TRAINING IN THE PATH OF MEDITATION**

Shariputra, therefore, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no discrimination, no compositional factors, no consciousness;

This indicates the emptiness of inherent existence of the five aggregates. The five aggregates do not exist inherently.

... no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no visual form, no sound, no odor, no taste, no object of touch, and no phenomenon.

This explains the emptiness of the twelve sources.

There is no eye element and so on up to and including no mind element and no mental consciousness element.

This shows the emptiness of the eighteen elements. The six sense powers and the six consciousnesses are explicitly mentioned. What is implied in the meaning? The six objects are also implied in the meaning. So they form the eighteen elements in total.

|                        | <b>EIGHTEEN ELEMENTS</b>                                                                                                                             | <b>TWELVE SOURCES</b>                                                                                                 |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Objects</b>         | 1. Form element<br>2. Sound element<br>3. Odour element<br>4. Taste element<br>5. Tangible object element<br>6. Phenomenon element                   | 1. Form source<br>2. Sound source<br>3. Odour source<br>4. Taste source<br>5. Tangible source<br>6. Phenomenon source |
| <b>Sense powers</b>    | 1. Eye element<br>2. Ear element<br>3. Nose element<br>4. Tongue element<br>5. Body element<br>6. Mental element                                     | 1. Eye source<br>2. Ear source<br>3. Nose source<br>4. Tongue source<br>5. Body source<br>6. Mental source            |
| <b>Consciousnesses</b> | 1. Eye consciousness<br>2. Ear consciousness<br>3. Nose consciousness<br>4. Tongue consciousness<br>5. Body consciousness<br>6. Mental consciousness |                                                                                                                       |

There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance and so on up to and including no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death.

This shows the emptiness of the twelve links of dependent origination in its forward process and its reverse process. It is also talking about the emptiness of the twelve



links from the perspective of the class of thoroughly afflicted phenomena and the class of the thoroughly purified phenomena.

Similarly, there is no suffering, origination, cessation, and path;

This indicates the emptiness of the four noble truths.

... there is no exalted wisdom, ...

This indicates that the wisdom perceiving emptiness is in itself also empty of existing inherently.

... no attainment, ...

The attainments themselves do not exist inherently.

... and also no non- attainment.

The attainments that are to be achieved are also empty of inherent existence.

This entire paragraph is talking about the training of the perfection of wisdom on the path of meditation. In this paragraph, quite a long list of phenomena is given. It is stating that all these phenomena, the twelve sources, the further expanded eighteen elements and so forth are empty of existing inherently. What it is also trying to tell us is that none of these phenomena exist in the perspective of a superior's meditative equipoise directly perceiving emptiness. In the perspective of that wisdom, only emptiness appears. Only emptiness exists, nothing else. It is said that there is no dualistic appearance in the perspective of the superior's meditative equipoise directly perceiving emptiness. All dualistic appearances have subsided.

The next paragraph shows how one achieves enlightenment by depending on the training in the perfection of wisdom on the path of accumulation, the path of preparation, the path of seeing and the path of meditation. This is how one has train to achieve enlightenment and this is how the buddhas in the past have achieved enlightenment.

Shariputra, therefore, because there is no attainment, bodhisattvas rely on and dwell in the perfection of wisdom, the mind without obscuration and without fear. Having completely passed beyond error, they reach the end-point of nirvana. All the buddhas who dwell in the three times also manifestly, completely awaken to unsurpassable, perfect, complete enlightenment in reliance on the perfection of wisdom.

The next paragraph expresses the greatness of the perfection of wisdom. In this context, the perfection of wisdom here is the path perfection of wisdom, the wisdom realising emptiness.

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 definitive meaning, the actual mantra is the wisdom realising emptiness. ‘Mantra’ is made up of two syllables, *man* and *tra* that means *mind protection*, i.e., protecting the mind from fear and protecting the mind from suffering. What is it that protects? It is the wisdom realising emptiness that protects.

This paragraph then goes on to talk about the features of the mantra, i.e., how special and great the perfection of wisdom is.

Next is the declaration of the mantra that is the brief or condensed presentation of the five paths.

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

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

This is like a summary and again emphasises in brief that this is how one must train in the perfection of wisdom.

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.”

Next is the conclusion and rejoicing:

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.

When we manage to gain some insight and some understanding of the ultimate nature of reality, the emptiness of inherent existence, this is a cause for us to rejoice. The benefit is similar to learning all the teachings or scriptures of the buddhas.

The Buddha arose from his meditative equipoise and said, “Well done.” Likewise, when we manage to gain some understanding of the ultimate nature of reality, this is also a cause for the buddhas to rejoice. This is what really pleases the buddhas. It is the supreme and the best offering to the buddhas. The buddhas will rejoice. Likewise the gods and the asuras and so forth will also feel happy. They will help us and not disturb us.

Although the buddhas are powerful but, in order for us to receive the inspiration and blessings from the buddhas, first we must be a suitable receptacle for receiving the blessing. When we engage in the threefold activity of hearing, reflection and meditation on emptiness, the perfection of wisdom, definitely this will make us a receptacle to receive the blessings.

This concludes our study of *The Heart of Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*. Based on the benefits that were taught by the buddhas—the benefits that one can gain from learning, reflecting, thinking and meditating on it—from that, we can infer that all of us have accumulated a vast amount of merit. We should rejoice in that.

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I was asked, “What is a bodhisattva mahasattva?” *Bodhi* refers to the great enlightenment so a *bodhisattva* is an aspirant to enlightenment. What this person is aspiring to is the truth body, the dharmakaya. He sees that as the object to be achieved. From that perspective, he is a bodhisattva because he aspires to achieve that.

Because he aspires to full enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, therefore he is a *mahasattva*. *Sattva* is loosely translated as *being*. So, he is a great being, a *mahasattva*, because he aspires to that enlightenment for others.

We are looking at the etymology of the words, ‘bodhisattva’ and ‘mahasattva.’

- Because he aspires to the dharmakaya in order to accomplish his own purpose, he is a bodhisattva.
- Because he aspires to this enlightenment also to accomplish the welfare of others, he is called a mahasattva.

Khen Rinpoche announced that there will be a teaching on mind training by Geshe Thubten Sherab, the ex-principal of Kopan Monastery, on Tuesday 30 July 2013.

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