

The Heart Sutra

Amitabha Buddhist Center
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Why is emptiness important?

- The realization of emptiness is the main antidote to ignorance
- Ignorance is the root of all our problems
- Without the realization of emptiness, it is not possible to attain liberation or enlightenment
- Therefore, if we don't understand emptiness, we will continue to circle in samsara, and our ability to help others will be limited

Why is it hard to understand?

- Our mind has been affected by ignorance—a wrong way of seeing things—since beginningless time
- To counteract this, we need to hear correct explanations on emptiness again and again
- We also need to study, reflect, and discuss it with our dharma friends
- It is also necessary to do purification and accumulation of merit

Emptiness/selflessness

Two kinds of selflessness / emptiness:

1. Selflessness of persons
2. Selflessness of phenomena (things other than persons)
 - These are explained differently by the four main schools of Buddhist philosophy (Vaibhasika, Sautrantika, Cittamatra/Yogacara, and Madhyamika)

Emptiness/selflessness (according to the Madhyamaka Prasangika school)

- Selflessness of persons = a person is empty of existing inherently
- Selflessness of phenomena = all things other than persons (especially the five aggregates) are empty of existing inherently
- Inherent existence = independent existence; something existing all on its own, without depending on anything else

Dependent Arising: the “king of reasons” for understanding emptiness

Three ways things are dependent:

1. Causes and conditions (impermanent things)
2. Parts (all things, impermanent and permanent)
3. Mental labeling (all things)

Therefore, nothing exists independently!

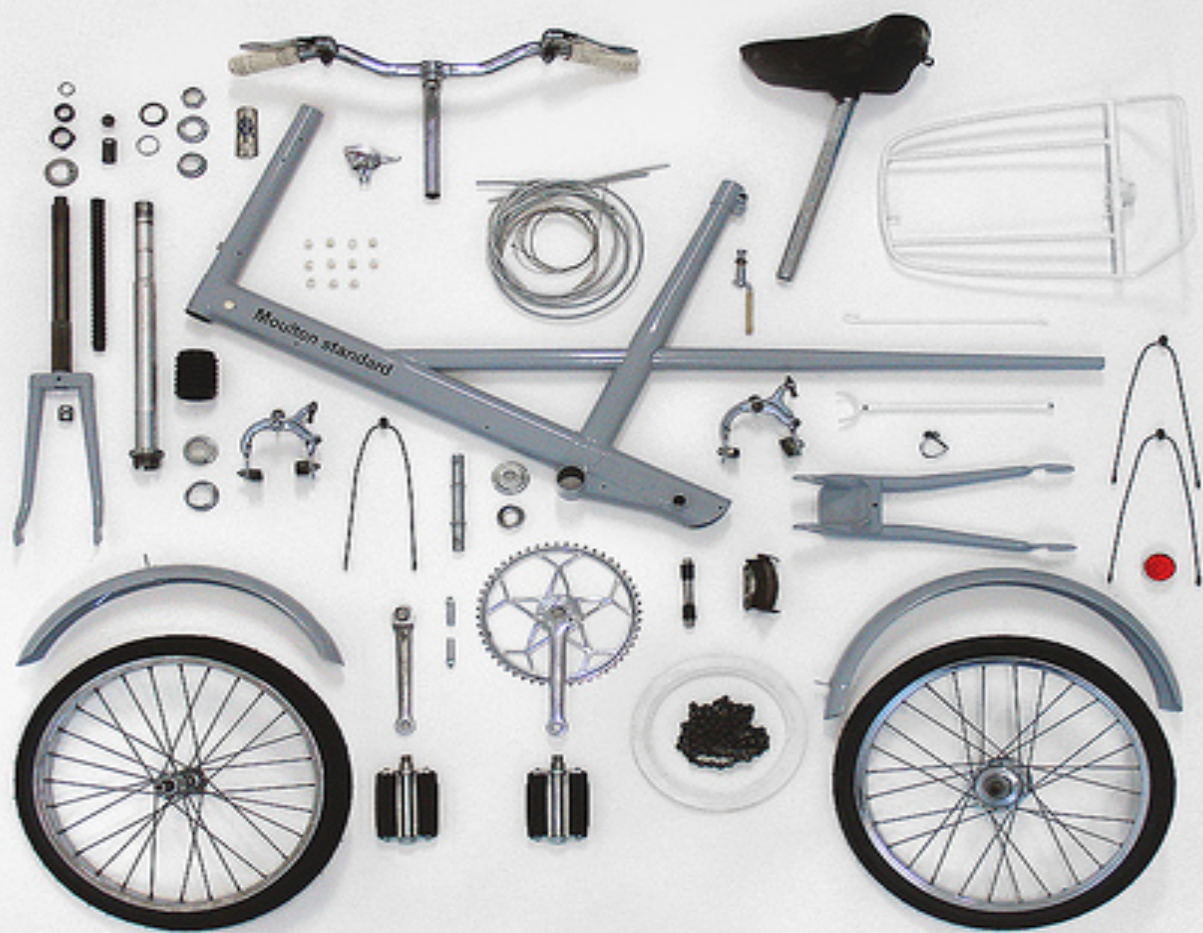
Our body is dependent

- It depends on causes and conditions (parents, sperm & egg, food, air, etc.)
- It depends on parts (head, arms, legs, brain, heart, liver, cells, atoms, etc.)
- It depends on mental labelling (“body” is labelled on these parts)
- Conclusion: our body is **empty** of independent / inherent existence

Our mind is dependent

- It depends on causes and conditions (one moment of mind depends on the previous moment, on its object, etc.)
- It depends on parts (the moments of mind that make up the mind-stream)
- It depends on mental labelling (“mind” is labelled on these parts)
- Conclusion: our mind is **empty** of independent / inherent existence





The nun Vajira said to Mara:

“Just as, with an assemblage of parts,

The word 'chariot' is used,

So, when the aggregates are present,

There's the convention 'a being.'”

How a person/being is dependent

- It depends on causes and conditions (parents, karma, etc.)
- It depends on parts (e.g. the five aggregates; or the body and mind)
- It depends on mental labelling (“person” is labelled on these parts)
- Conclusion: a person is **empty** of independent / inherent existence

Avalokitesvara's answer

“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 existence.”



The five aggregates

Form	Feelings	Discriminations	Compositional Factors	Consciousness
The body	A mental factor that arises with every moment of awareness. 3 types of feelings: 1. pleasant 2. unpleasant 3. neutral	A mental factor that arises with every moment of awareness. It apprehends the uncommon signs, or characteristics, of objects, e.g. blue, red, cat, dog, etc.	This category includes all the remaining mental factors (other than feelings and discriminations)	The 6 types of main minds: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mental consciousnesses

“Form is empty.”

- This refers to the ultimate nature of form: that it is empty of inherent existence.
- There are two aspects of every phenomenon / the two truths:
 - Conventional truth: for example, our body
 - Ultimate truth: the emptiness of inherent existence of our body

“Emptiness is form.”

- This means that emptiness of inherent existence is the true/ultimate nature of form. It could also be said that form is a manifestation of emptiness.
- For example, the true nature of the body is that it is empty of inherent existence. Although it is empty of inherent existence, it still exists, does things, etc.
- In fact, if the body were *not* empty of inherent existence, it would not be able to grow, change, do things, etc.

The two extremes

- Permanence/eternalism = thinking that things exist inherently. “Form is empty” refutes this extreme.
- Nihilism = thinking that things do not exist at all. “Emptiness is form” refutes this extreme (because, although the body is empty of inherent existence, it still exists).

“Emptiness is not other than form; form is also not other than emptiness.”

- This means that the two truths (conventional and ultimate) are one entity/nature.
- That means, e.g. a body and its emptiness are inseparable, like two sides of a coin.

“In the same way, feelings, discriminations, compositional factors, and consciousness are empty.”

- The same analysis applies to each of the other four aggregates.
- E.g. “Feelings are empty. Emptiness is feelings. Emptiness is not other than feelings. Feelings are also not other than emptiness.”

“Shariputra, likewise, all phenomena are emptiness...”

- The eight aspects of the profound:
 1. Nature: “all phenomena are emptiness”
 2. Characteristics: “without [inherently existent] characteristics”
 3. Production: “unproduced [inherently]”
 4. Cessation: “unceasing [inherently]”
 5. Stained: “stainless”
 6. Separated from stains: “not without stain”
 7. Decrease: “not [inherently] deficient”
 8. Increase: “not [inherently] fulfilled”

“Shariputra, therefore, in emptiness there is no form... (etc.—the five aggregates);

“no eye, no ear... ...no phenomenon (the twelve sources: 6 senses and 6 objects).

“There is no eye element... No mental consciousness element (the eighteen elements: the 12 sources plus the 6 kinds of consciousness).

“There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance.... up to no aging and death (the 12 links, forward and reverse order)...

“There is no suffering... and path (4 noble truths)...”

- “no exalted wisdom” = while in meditative equipoise on emptiness, a separate subject disappears, only emptiness appears.
- “no attainment” = refers to realizations, good qualities, good results from practicing Dharma—these don’t appear to that mind.
- “No non-attainment” = if one has not yet attained a result, e.g. Buddhahood, this too is empty of inherent existence.

- “Sariputra, therefore, because there is no attainment... the mind without obscuration and without fear” = This refers to the vajra-like Samadhi, which is the last state of mind of a sentient being, before becoming a Buddha.
- “they reach the end-point of nirvana” = Path of No More Learning, Buddhahood.
- “All the Buddhas....wisdom” = advice for practice.

The Mantra

Tayatha = it's like this

[OM] = body, speech & mind of Buddha

Gate = “go” to the Path of Accumulation

Gate = “go” to the Path of Preparation

Paragate = “go beyond” to the Path of Seeing

Parasamgate = “go completely beyond” to the Path of Meditation

Bodhi = “enlightenment” (the Path of No More Learning)

Soha = “be rooted in”

The mantra shows how the realization of emptiness is related to the 5 paths.

The four profundities / four modes of emptiness

1. **Form is empty** – the ultimate nature of form; it is empty of inherent existence
2. **Emptiness is form** – the subtle conventional nature of form; form is a manifestation of emptiness.
- 3 & 4. **Emptiness is not other than form; form is also not other than emptiness** – the two truths are one entity, but different