A New Look at the Heart Sutra, from Thich Nhat Hanh and Norman Fischer

Thich Nhat Hanh offers his new translation of the Heart Sutra, which teaches transcendent wisdom, and Norman Fischer offers comment.

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The key term in Buddhism’s *Heart Sutra* is the Sanskrit word *shunyata*, usually translated into English as “emptiness.” As the sutra says in its opening lines, “All dharmas [things, phenomena] are empty.” Eyes, ears, noses, tongues, bodies, minds: all external objects—and all Buddhist teachings—are empty.

The word “emptiness” is a fair translation of *shunyata*, but it has the drawback of sounding negative, even despairing. The emptiness of the *Heart Sutra* is something else entirely. It’s good news of joyful freedom and liberation. Commentators to the sutra often ask the question, “Empty of what?” and answer, “Empty of separate self, empty of weightiness, empty of burden, empty of boundary.”
The Chinese, searching for a word that might translate *shunyata*, used the character for “sky.” All dharmas are empty like the sky—blue, beautiful, expansive, and always ready to receive a bird, a wind, a cloud, the sun, the moon, or an airplane. The emptiness of the *Heart Sutra* isn’t the emptiness of despair; it’s the emptiness of all limitation and boundary. It is open, released.

When I am bound inside my own skin and others are bound inside theirs, I have to defend and protect myself from them. And when I do place myself among them, I must do it carefully, which is hard work, because I am often hurt, opposed, and thwarted by others. But when there’s openness, no boundary between myself and others—when it turns out that I literally am others and others literally are me—then love and connection is easy and natural.

This is why the emptiness teaching of the *Heart Sutra*, which seems to be rather philosophical and dour, is the necessary basis for compassion. Emptiness and compassion go hand in hand. Compassion as transaction—me over here, being compassionate to you over there—is simply too clunky and difficult. If I am going to be responsible to receive your suffering and do something about it, and if I

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this teaching takes time and effort, and maybe we never entirely arrive at it. But it’s a joyful, heartfelt path worth treading.

In Mahayana Buddhism, compassion is often discussed in terms of absolute and relative compassion. Absolute compassion is compassion in the light of emptiness: all beings are empty; all beings are, by virtue of their empty nature, already liberated and pure. As the sutra says, suffering is empty, and relief from suffering is also empty.

But this would be one-sided and distorted. Relative compassion—human warmth and practical emotional support—completes the picture. Absolute compassion makes it possible for us to sustain, joyfully, the endless work of supporting and helping; relative compassion grounds our broad view of life’s empty nature in heart connection and engagement. Either view by itself would be impossible, but both together make for a wonderfully connected and sustainable life.

The Insight That Brings Us to the Other Shore

The insight of prajñaparamita, the perfection of wisdom as taught in the Heart Sutra, is the ultimate truth, transcending of all conventional truths. It is the highest vision of the Buddha.

Prajñaparamita is the liberating insight that helps us to
overcome all pairs of opposites, such as birth and death, being and non-being, defilement and immaculacy, increasing and decreasing, subject and object, and so on. All phenomena are products of dependent arising: that is the main point of the prajñaparamita teaching. This helps us to get in touch with the true nature of no birth/no death, no being/no non-being, etc., which is the true nature of all phenomena.

This is a state of coolness, peace, and non-fear that can be experienced in this very life, in your own body and in your own five skandhas. It is nirvana. As it is said in a very beautiful sentence in the nirvana chapter of the Chinese Dharmapada, “Just as the birds enjoy the sky, and the deer enjoy the meadow, so do the wise enjoy dwelling in nirvana.”—Thich Nhat Hanh

Avalokiteshvara while practicing deeply with the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore, suddenly discovered that all of the five Skandhas are equally empty, and with this realization he overcame all Ill-being.

“Listen Sariputra, this Body itself is Emptiness and Emptiness itself is this Body. This Body is not other than Emptiness and Emptiness is not other than this Body. The same is true of Feelings,
Perceptions, Mental Formations, and Consciousness.

“Listen Sariputra, all phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness; their true nature is the nature of no Birth no Death, no Being no Non-being, no Defilement no Immaculacy, no Increasing no Decreasing.

“That is why in Emptiness, Body, Feelings, Perceptions, Mental Formations and Consciousness are not separate self entities. “The Eighteen Realms of Phenomena which are the six Sense Organs, the six Sense Objects, and the six Consciousnesses are also not separate self entities.

“The Twelve Links of Interdependent Arising and their Extinction are also not separate self entities.

“Ill-being, the Causes of Ill-being, the End of Ill-being, the Path, insight and attainment, are also not separate self entities.

“Whoever can see this no longer needs anything to attain.
“Bodhisattvas who practice the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore see no more obstacles in their mind, and because there are no more obstacles in their mind, they can overcome all fear, destroy all wrong perceptions and realize Perfect Nirvana.

“All Buddhas in the past, present, and future by practicing the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore are all capable of attaining Authentic and Perfect Enlightenment.

“Therefore Sariputra, it should be known that the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore is a Great Mantra, the most illuminating mantra, the highest mantra, a mantra beyond compare, the True Wisdom that has the power to put an end to all kinds of suffering. Therefore let us proclaim a mantra to praise the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore.

“Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha! Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha! Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha!”
Thich Nhat Hanh translates the Heart Sutra’s closing Sankrit mantra as: Gone, gone, gone all the way over, everyone gone to the other shore. Enlightenment!

Image: “I have arrived I am home” calligraphy by Thich Nhat Hanh, available in the Lion’s Roar Store.