The Heart Sutra: the Fullness of Emptiness

Emptiness is not something to be afraid of, says Thich Nhat Hanh. The Heart Sutra teaches us that form may be empty of self but it’s full of everything else.

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If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. We can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. “Interbeing” is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix “inter-” with the verb “to be,” we have a new verb, “inter-be.”

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we
can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. So we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger’s father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also, so we can say that everything is in here in this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything coexists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. To be is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is. Suppose we try to return one of the elements to its source.

**The word emptiness should not scare us. It is a wonderful word.**
Suppose we return the sunshine to the sun. Do you think that this sheet of paper would be possible? No, without sunshine nothing can be. And if we return the logger to his mother, then we have no sheet of paper either. The fact is that this sheet of paper is made up only of “non-paper elements.” And if we return these non-paper elements to their sources, then there can be no paper at all. Without non-paper elements, like mind, logger, sunshine, and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.

But the Heart Sutra seems to say the opposite. Avalokiteshvara tells us that things are empty. Let us look more closely.

Empty of What?

The Bodhisattva Avalokita, while moving in the deep course of Perfect Understanding, shed light on the five skandhas and found them equally empty.

Bodhi means being awake, and sattva means a living being, so bodhisattva means an awakened being. All of us are sometimes bodhisattvas, and sometimes not. Avalokita is the shorter name of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Avalokita is neither male nor female and sometimes
appears as a man and sometimes as a woman. In Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese, this bodhisattva’s name is sometimes translated as Guanyin, Quan Am, Gwaneum, and Kannon, which means “the one who listens and hears the cries of the world in order to come and help.” Avalokiteshvara also embodies the spirit of non-fear, as he himself has transcended fear. The Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra is his wonderful gift to us.

According to Avalokiteshvara, this sheet of paper is empty; but according to our analysis, it is full of everything. There seems to be a contradiction between our observation and his. Avalokita found the five skandhas empty. But empty of what? The key word is empty. To be empty is to be empty of something.

If I am holding a cup of water and I ask you, “Is this cup empty?” you will say, “No, it is full of water.” But if I pour out the water and ask you again, you may say, “Yes, it is empty.” But empty of what? Empty means empty of something. The cup cannot be empty of nothing. “Empty” doesn’t mean anything unless you know “empty of what?” My cup is empty of water, but it is not empty of air. To be empty is to be empty of something. This is quite a discovery. When Avalokita says that the five skandhas are equally empty, to help him be precise we must ask, “Mr. Avalokita, empty of what?”

The five skandhas, which may be translated into English as five heaps, or five aggregates, are the five elements that comprise a human being. These five elements flow like a
river in every one of us. In fact, these are really five rivers flowing together in us: the river of form, which means our bodies; the river of feelings; the river of perceptions; the river of mental formations; and the river of consciousness. They are always flowing in us. So according to Avalokita, when he looked deeply into the nature of these five rivers, he suddenly saw that all five are empty.

If we ask, “Empty of what?” he has to answer. And this is what he said: “They are empty of a separate self.” That means none of these five rivers can exist by itself alone. Each of the five rivers has to be made by the other four. It has to coexist; it has to inter-be with all the others.

“Emptiness” means empty of a separate self. It is full of everything.

In our bodies we have lungs, heart, kidneys, stomach, and blood. None of these can exist independently. They can only coexist with the others. Your lungs and your blood are two things, but neither can exist separately. The lungs take in air and enrich the blood, and, in turn, the blood nourishes the lungs. Without the blood, the lungs cannot be alive, and without the lungs, the blood cannot be cleansed. Lungs and blood inter-are. The same is true with kidneys and blood, kidneys and stomach, lungs and heart, blood and heart, and so on.

When Avalokita says that our sheet of paper is empty, he
means it is empty of a separate, independent existence. It cannot just be by itself. It has to inter-be with the sunshine, the cloud, the forest, the logger, the mind, and everything else. It is empty of a separate self. But, empty of a separate self means full of everything. So it seems that our observation and that of Avalokita do not contradict each other after all. Avalokita looked deeply into the five skandhas of form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, and he discovered that none of them can be by itself alone. Each can only inter-be with all the others. So he tells us that form is empty. Form is empty of a separate self, but it is full of everything in the cosmos. The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

Long Live Emptiness

Listen, Shariputra,
form is emptiness, and emptiness is form.
Form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form.
The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

Form is the wave and emptiness is the water. To understand this, we have to think differently than many of us who were raised in the West were trained to think. In the West, when we draw a circle, we consider it to be zero, nothingness. But in India and many other Asian countries, a circle means totality, wholeness. The meaning is the
opposite. So “form is emptiness, and emptiness is form” is like wave is water, water is wave. “Form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form. The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness,” because these contain each other. Because one exists, everything exists.

In the Vietnamese literary canon, there are two lines of poetry by a twelfth-century Zen master of the Ly dynasty that say:

If the cosmos exists, then the smallest speck of dust exists.
If the smallest speck of dust doesn’t exist, then the whole cosmos doesn’t exist.

The poet means that the notions of existence and nonexistence are just created by our minds. He also said that “the entire cosmos can be put on the tip of a hair,” and “the sun and the moon can be seen in a mustard seed.” These images show us that one contains everything, and everything is just one.

Because form is emptiness, form is possible. In form we find everything else—feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. “Emptiness” means empty of a separate self. It is full of everything, full of life. The word “emptiness” should not scare us. It is a wonderful word. To be empty does not mean to be nonexistent. If the sheet of paper is not empty, how could the sunshine, the
logger, and the forest come into it? How could it be a sheet of paper? The cup, in order to be empty, has to be there. Form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, in order to be empty of a separate self, have to be there.

Emptiness is the ground of everything. “Thanks to emptiness, everything is possible.” That is a declaration made by Nagarjuna, a Buddhist philosopher of the second century. Emptiness is quite an optimistic concept. If I am not empty, I cannot be here. And if you are not empty, you cannot be there. Because you are there, I can be here. This is the true meaning of emptiness. Form does not have a separate existence. Avalokita wants us to understand this point.

Happy Continuation

Listen, Shariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness. They are neither produced nor destroyed.

_Dharmas_ in this line means “things.” A human being is a dharma. A tree is a dharma. A cloud is a dharma. The sunshine is a dharma. Everything that can be conceived of is a dharma. So when we say, “All dharmas are marked with emptiness,” we are saying, “Everything has emptiness as its own nature.” And that is why everything can be. There is a lot of joy in this statement. It means nothing can be born, nothing can die. Avalokita has said something
extremely important.

Every day in our lives, we see birth and we see death. When a person is born, a birth certificate is printed for them. After they die, a death certificate is made. These certificates confirm the existence of birth and death. But Avalokita said, “No, there is no birth and death.” We have to look more deeply to see whether his statement is true. What is the date on which you were born, your birth date? Before that date, did you already exist? Were you already there before you were born? Let me help you. To be born means from nothing you become something. My question is, before you were born, were you already there?

Suppose a hen is about to lay an egg. Before she gives birth, do you think the egg is already there? Yes, of course. It is inside. You also were inside before you were outside. That means that before you were born, you already existed—inside your mother. The fact is that if something is already there, it does not need to be born. To be born means from nothing you become something. If you are already something, what is the use of being born?

So, your so-called birthday is really your continuation day. The next time you celebrate, you can say, “Happy Continuation Day.” I think that we may have a better concept of when we were born. If we go back nine months to the time of our conception, we have a better date to put on our birth certificates. In China, and also in Vietnam, when you are born, you are already considered one year old. So we say we begin to be at the time of our conception in our mother’s womb, and we write down that date on our
birth certificate.

But the question remains: Even before that date, did you exist or not? If you say “yes,” I think you are correct. Before your conception, you were there already, maybe half in your father, half in your mother. Because from nothing, we can never become something. Can you name one thing that was once a nothing? A cloud? Do you think that a cloud can be born out of nothing? Before becoming a cloud, it was water, maybe flowing as a river. It was not nothing. Do you agree?

We cannot conceive of the birth of anything. There is only continuation. Please look back even further and you will see that you not only exist in your father and mother, but you also exist in your grandparents and your great-grandparents. As I look more deeply, I can see that in a former life I was a cloud. This is not poetry; it is science. Why do I say that in a former life I was a cloud? Because I am still a cloud. Without the cloud, I cannot be here. I am the cloud, the river, and the air at this very moment, so I know that in the past I have been a cloud, a river, and the air. And I was a rock. I was the minerals in the water. This is not a question of belief in reincarnation. This is the history of life on Earth. We have been gas, sunshine, water, fungi, and plants. We have been single-celled beings. The Buddha said that in one of his former lives, he was a tree. He was a fish; he was a deer. These are not superstitious things. Every one of us has been a cloud, a deer, a bird, a fish, and we continue to be these things, not just in former lives.
This is not just the case with birth. Nothing can be born, and also nothing can die. That is what Avalokita said. Do you think that a cloud can die? To die means that from something you become nothing. Do you think that we can make something a nothing? Let us go back to our sheet of paper. We may have the illusion that to destroy it, all we have to do is light a match and burn it up. But if we burn a sheet of paper, some of it will become smoke, and the smoke will rise and continue to be. The heat that is caused by the burning paper will enter into the cosmos and penetrate other things. The heat is the next life of the paper. The ash that is formed will become part of the soil, and the sheet of paper, in his or her next life, might be a cloud and a rose at the same time. We have to be very careful and attentive in order to realize that this sheet of paper has never been born and it will never die. It can take on other forms of being, but we are not capable of transforming a sheet of paper into nothingness. Everything is like that, even you and I. We are not subject to birth and death.

One autumn day I was in a park, absorbed in the contemplation of a very small but beautiful leaf in the shape of a heart. Its color was almost red, and it was barely hanging on the branch, nearly ready to fall down. I spent a long time with it, and I asked the leaf a lot of questions. I found out the leaf had been a mother to the tree. Usually we think that the tree is the mother and the leaves are just children, but as I looked at the leaf I saw that the leaf is also a mother to the tree. The sap that the roots take up is only water and minerals, not good enough to nourish the
tree, so the tree distributes that sap to the leaves. The leaves take the responsibility of transforming that rough sap into refined sap and, with the help of the sun and gas, sending it back in order to nourish the tree. Therefore, the leaves are also the mother to the tree. And since the leaf is linked to the tree by a stem, the communication between them is easy to see.

We do not have a stem linking us to our mother anymore, but when we were in her womb we had a very long stem, an umbilical cord. The oxygen and the nourishment we needed came to us through that stem. Unfortunately, on the day we call our birthday, it was cut and we received the illusion that we are independent. That is a mistake. We continue to rely on our mother for a very long time, and we have several other mothers as well. The Earth is our mother. We have a great many stems linking us to our mother Earth. There is a stem linking us with the cloud. If there is no cloud, there is no water for us to drink. We are made of at least seventy percent water; the stem between the cloud and us is really there. This is also the case with the river, the forest, the logger, and the farmer. There are hundreds of thousands of stems linking us to everything in the cosmos, and therefore we can be. Do you see the link between you and me? If you are not there, I am not here; that is certain. If you do not see it yet, look more deeply and I am sure you will see. This is not philosophy. You really have to see.

I asked the leaf whether it was scared because it was autumn and the other leaves were falling. The leaf told me,
“No. During the whole spring and summer I was very alive. I worked hard and helped nourish the tree, and much of me is in the tree. Please do not say that I am just this form, because this leaf form is only a tiny part of me. I am the whole tree. I know that I am already inside the tree, and when I go back to the soil, I will continue to nourish the tree. That’s why I do not worry. As I leave this branch and float to the ground, I will wave to the tree and tell her, ‘I will see you again very soon.’”

If a wave only sees its form, with its beginning and end, it will be afraid of birth and death. But if the wave sees that it is water and identifies itself with the water, then it will be emancipated from birth and death. Each wave is born and is going to die, but the water is free from birth and death.

Suddenly I saw a kind of wisdom very much like the wisdom contained in the Heart Sutra. You have to see life. You shouldn’t say, life of the leaf, but life in the leaf, and life in the tree. My life is just Life, and you can see it in me and in the tree. That day there was a wind blowing and,
after a while, I saw the leaf leave the branch and float down to the soil, dancing joyfully, because as it floated it saw itself already there in the tree. It was so happy. I bowed my head, and I knew that we have a lot to learn from the leaf because it was not afraid—it knew that nothing can be born and nothing can die.

The cloud in the sky will also not be scared. When the time comes, the cloud will become rain. It is fun becoming rain, falling down, chanting, and becoming part of the Mississippi River, or the Amazon River, or the Mekong River, or falling onto vegetables and later becoming part of a human being. It is a very exciting adventure. The cloud knows that if it falls to the earth it might become part of the ocean. So the cloud isn’t afraid. Only humans are afraid.

A wave on the ocean has a beginning and an end, a birth and a death. But Avalokiteshvara tells us that the wave is empty. The wave is full of water, but it is empty of a separate self. A wave is a form that has been made possible, thanks to the existence of wind and water. If a wave only sees its form, with its beginning and end, it will be afraid of birth and death. But if the wave sees that it is water and identifies itself with the water, then it will be emancipated from birth and death. Each wave is born and is going to die, but the water is free from birth and death.

So you see there are many lessons we can learn from the cloud, the water, the wave, the leaf—and from everything else in the cosmos, too. If you look at anything carefully and deeply enough, you discover the mystery of interbeing,
and once you have seen it you will no longer be subject to fear—fear of birth, or fear of death. Birth and death are only ideas we have in our minds, and these ideas cannot be applied to reality. It is just like the idea of above and below. We are very sure that when we point up, it is above, and when we point in the opposite direction, it is below. Heaven is above, and hell is below. But the people who are sitting right now on the other side of the planet must disagree, because the idea of above and below does not apply to the cosmos, nor does the idea of birth and death.

So please continue to look back and you will see that you have always been here. Let us look together and penetrate into the life of a leaf, so we may be one with the leaf. Let us penetrate and be one with the cloud or with the wave, to realize our own nature as water and be free from our fear. If we look very deeply, we will transcend birth and death.

Tomorrow, I will continue to be. But you will have to be very attentive to see me. I will be a flower, or a leaf. I will be in these forms and I will say hello to you. If you are attentive enough, you will recognize me, and you may greet me. I will be very happy.

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Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022) was a renowned Zen teacher and poet, the founder of the Engaged Buddhist movement, and the founder of nine monastic communities, including Plum Village Monastery in France. He was also the author of *At Home in the World*, *The Other Shore*, and more than a hundred other books that have sold millions of copies worldwide.