



Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche Teachings

Integrating the meaning of emptiness in every day life Comments on the Heart Sutra

*Talk given by Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche at Vulture Peak, India,
during a pilgrimage to the Buddha's main sites with his students
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To begin this talk, I want to say something personal. Unless you respect or value the texts and the teachings, they won't benefit you, but will bore you. At the same time, you shouldn't develop emotions or opinions such as, 'The teacher is giving my favourite teaching. He is so good.' Or 'I don't like what she is doing now, she really isn't a good lama.' One day our teacher is our favourite person in the world and the next day the worst. Projecting your emotions onto me or onto the text is not helpful. Such concepts benefit no one, so I'm telling you this directly. Otherwise you won't actually absorb the teaching.

Today we are talking about the Heart Sutra. One meaning of the Tibetan word 'heart' is essence. With reference to the Mahayana - or 'Great Vehicle' - teachings, the title means that this is the essence of the Buddha's discourses, his sutras. It is a teaching on the essence of all the sutras. This is the first point.

What is the main topic of this sutra? The Heart Sutra describes emptiness. We might think, 'Oh, emptiness is very holy, very precious'. With that kind of view, believing that emptiness is something unattainable, we might as well be saying that there is gold in the sky. We can talk about it, but it cannot help us. The meaning of the sutra must connect with our mind and be used as a means to control our negative emotions. That is the only relevant point. If this sutra had no connection to our mental state, or if it did not provide us with a skillful method to eliminate our negative emotions, it would not be so

important. The Heart Sutra's importance is linked with its relevance. That's the second point.

In Tibetan the text is called 'Sherab Nyingpo' and in Sanskrit 'Prajñāpāramitāhṛidaya'¹. Often the term Bhagawati precedes the Sanskrit title, referring to a goddess or female deity. *Prajñā* means wisdom. What kind of wisdom? The wisdom of realizing emptiness. *Pāri* means beyond or transcendent, and *Hridaya* is the essence, the heart.

Goddess in this context is not a goddess like Green Tara, but denotes emptiness, the object of this sutra. Why do we call emptiness a goddess? When we realise emptiness by familiarizing ourselves with it and practicing it we can gain control over our negative emotions, and this elevates us to the state of a noble son or daughter - a Bodhisattva or an Arhat, who will eventually achieve enlightenment. The Heart Sutra therefore functions like a mother giving birth to a noble child. For that reason emptiness is also called Great Mother in Tibetan.

The text opens with the context of the Heart Sutra²:

“Thus have I heard:

At one time the Blessed One was dwelling in Rajgriha at Vulture Peak Mountain, together with a great community of monks and a great community of bodhisattvas.

At that time, the Blessed One entered an absorption on categories of phenomena called 'perception of the profound'.

At the same time, noble Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva and great being, beheld the practice of the profound perfection of wisdom, and saw that the five aggregates are empty of nature.”

Whenever the teachings of the Buddha are reiterated, the tradition - established by Buddha Shakyani himself - is that the exact location as well as the type of students gathered and their names are mentioned. In the historical context of the Buddha's time, this proves the teaching's authenticity. Thus, establishing these circumstances is very important.

At that time the Bhagawan³ was absorbed in a meditative state called 'profound perception'. What was the object of the Buddha's concentration and what did the Bodhisattva Mahasattva Avalokiteshvara perceive? The object of the meditation was beholding the five aggregates. These are form, feeling, perception, karmic formations,

¹ The direct translation of the Sanskrit title is 'The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom'.

² The translation of the Heart Sutra is taken from the Lotsawa House webpage. <http://www.lotsawahouse.org/words-of-the-buddha/heart-sutra-with-extras>

³ Bhagawan is another epithet of the Buddha, meaning 'Lord' in a spiritual context.

and consciousness. Misunderstanding the aggregates creates our negative emotions. Whenever we say I, my body, me, and the like, we are roughly referring to the five aggregates. Even though we cannot exactly pinpoint where I, me, and mine abide, the five aggregates function as the basis for a perceived 'I'. All our emotions develop through focusing on and being too attached to our physical bodies, which are form and the other four aggregates.

Next, we reach the following paragraph, where it says:

“Then, through the Buddha's power,
The Venerable Shariputra said to noble Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva and great being:
'How should a child of noble family who wishes to practice the profound perfection of wisdom train?’”

Through the power of the Buddha's meditative concentration, Shariputra's self-confidence surged and enabled him to ask this question to the Bodhisattva Mahasattva Avalokiteshvara. The question is very important: How do we apply and practice wisdom? What kind of wisdom? The wisdom that transcends Samsara. Going beyond Samsara doesn't mean travelling to a distant place, somewhere called Nirvana or Heaven. It's not about traversing a physical distance, but going beyond our normal, very conceptual and negative mind. How do we go beyond this ordinary mind and how do we abide in the natural mind? Those questions are the subject of Shariputra's inquiry.

Bodhisattva Mahasattva Avalokiteshvara answers:

“This is what he said, and the noble Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva and great being, replied to venerable Shāriputra as follows:
'O Shariputra, a son or daughter of noble family who wishes to practice the profound perfection of wisdom should regard things in this way:
They should see the five aggregates to be empty of nature.’”

Mahayana Buddhism believes that women are equal to men in their ability to practice and achieve Buddhahood. The Heart Sutra bears witness to this. It is very important. In the Himalayas, in Tibet, and also in the West, culturally men possess more rights than women, but this is not grounded in the Buddha's teachings.

Avalokiteshvara's main, concise advice is contained in this sentence: “**Correctly perceiving the five aggregates to be empty of nature**”. This is the main conclusion: one should look at the five aggregates as being devoid of inherent nature. The rest of the Heart Sutra simply explains emptiness in different words - first with physical form, which is very rough; then with feeling, which is subtler and has more facets; next

perception, which is even more subtle than feeling; and finally by the conceptual mind or karmic formations, and consciousness.

The text states:

“Form is empty; emptiness is form;
Emptiness is not other than form;
Form is not other than emptiness.”

These sentences are crucial. Why? Because they directly contradict our normal way of thinking and perceiving. Normally we believe that form cannot be emptiness, but that it is real and solid. If it were emptiness it would be like the sky, without a perceivable shape. That is our common belief, which resembles other ideas like: this is ok, this is not ok; this is possible, this is not possible; this exists, this is non-existing etc. These concepts provide the basic foundation for negative emotions. The Heart Sutra teaches us that in reality there is neither good nor bad, neither right nor left, neither front nor back. These are ideas that have no intrinsic existence.

We can use the sentence ‘Form is emptiness’ in various ways to help us in everyday life. For example when we get angry at someone, we can say: “The enemy is emptiness, emptiness is the enemy.” When we are too attached to an object like a camera, we can say: “The camera is emptiness, emptiness is the camera.” How exactly can we claim that the camera is emptiness? Usually we believe that the camera ultimately exists as a black material object. Thus, we must investigate which part of this object is the camera. How can we prove where ‘camera’ resides? Looking closely and investigating the object, we don’t find anything which is actually ‘camera’. At that level of research, ‘camera’ as such disappears. Our mind needs to take this in fully.

Normally we are attached to the camera existing in reality just as we perceive it. If we own it, we worry about it disappearing or breaking; if we do not possess it yet we want to acquire it, etc. All of these feelings and worries result from our attachment to our concept of the camera. A more detailed investigation into its nature reveals that the camera is emptiness, because we cannot ultimately prove its existence. Eventually the mind reaches a certain level where the concept of camera dissolves. At that point, if we abide in and meditate on this realization, our insight is the antidote to our attachment to the camera. That is the main point of the Heart Sutra, and supports us to overcome our negative emotions. Otherwise, merely reading the line “Form is empty, emptiness is form” is meaningless. Without understanding their application to our negative emotions, the words are not helpful. The following sentences of the Heart Sutra sound a little funny: no eye, no ear, no tongue, etc. At first they make no sense. Only after investigating them as described above do they become meaningful.

Another crucial point is that when in the grip of emotions, we are the foremost witness of our experience. Normally, from morning to night everything is only about 'me' and 'my things'. This self-centred attitude generates a whirlwind of emotions, especially creating fear, doubt and jealousy. I myself have this problem, and I've seen some people with serious problems in this regard. I'm not a good practitioner, yet I can see that certain people I know have too much self-attachment and suffer from it. Despite living in the same part of the world, in the same situation and under the same conditions, some people get angrier, generate more negative emotions, and have more problems than others. The external situation is basically the same, but the problems grow from the inside. These people may be too fixated on their own ideas, insisting too much on their own way and unable to let go or adjust. More problems arise as a result.

Let me tell you about my own experience. You may think that when I go on a pilgrimage like this one or travel to my village in Dolpo, it is pleasant and that I'm very fortunate. That is totally wrong. When I started traveling a few years ago, I had a lot of expectations. Sometimes I hoped to get to my room a bit earlier, to reach my destination faster, or to eat a certain kind of food. That was not always possible and I was often disappointed. Nowadays, I let go of my expectations from the beginning. Otherwise I couldn't handle the stress and it would prevent me from enjoying my time with you. If we have ten people on a pilgrimage, ten people complain to me at some point, wanting some kind of support. But I can't multiply myself into ten Dolpo Tulkus in order to serve everyone. So I try my best to forget my own wishes. The funny thing is, when I do that, I can enjoy myself more. What I am saying is that if we are too attached to our own physical well-being, to our own feelings, or our own viewpoint, we create the very obstacles that destroy our happiness.

Sometimes when I arrive at an airport - for example, when I travel to Europe or Malaysia - I simply discard any notion of being a Rinpoche. Then it's easy to go anywhere, and whatever happens is ok for me. But when I return to my normal surroundings and am not treated according to my Rinpoche status, this sometimes irritates my ego and I realize I have a problem. Likewise, when you return to your office, where some of you may work as secretaries or advisers or whatever, your ego accompanies you as you enter your work place. That is always difficult. However, once you overcome certain concepts based on your culture, status or nationality, you can feel freer and happier.

So, I think I'm a Rinpoche. What is this thing called Rinpoche? Is it my ear? Or is it my arm? No, Rinpoche is nowhere, nothing makes up Rinpoche. Believing in the Rinpoche concept just gives me more problems. Maybe it's the clothes? No. In fact, Rinpoche doesn't exist! We might think, if Rinpoche doesn't exist, some kind of 'I' might exist. But where is this 'I'? Please, look at this deeply and investigate it. Meditate and use the inspiration here in this holy place. Maybe our knowledge and the blessing of this sacred space can help us understand that we are empty of good and bad, empty of I and me,

empty of right and wrong. When the text says that form is emptiness, we have to connect and investigate the form our ego is attached to: my hand is really not me, my heart is really not me. Don't merely look at a rock and say that form is emptiness. That is not enough. Reflect on your own body and your own feelings and so on.

The text continues:

“In the same way, sensation, recognition,
Conditioning factors and consciousness are emptiness.
Therefore, Shariputra, all dharmas are emptiness.
They are without characteristics, they are unarisen and unceasing;
They are not tainted and not untainted;
They are not deficient and not complete.”

The Heart Sutra speaks of eight things. Please keep these in mind:

All phenomena are emptiness

Without characteristics

Unarisen

Unceasing

Not tainted

Not untainted

Not deficient

Not complete

These concepts are unusual, and they immediately contradict our ordinary concepts. Normally we think like this: “Form is empty.” But then you think, ‘No, I’m not empty; there are characteristics and something has arisen. It ceases. It is pure or impure, fulfilled or not fulfilled.’ This is our common belief system, and it causes and perpetuates negative emotions. Therefore, the Heart Sutra tells us that there are no characteristics.

I want to elaborate on this a little: What characterizes east and west? The cardinal direction depends on our position. No place is always and under all circumstances in the east or in the west. Ultimately everything is free from the four directions. Nobody can prove that something is in the east. But we believe this and in dependence on our belief we can determine where east and west are. However, this is not ultimate. Unfortunately, we fight like children over these differences between characteristics. We fight over status, over fame, over all sorts of things. But what does being famous mean ultimately? These disputes go on all the time and on all different levels. In the worst-case scenario, they even lead to wars and bloodshed.

The eight points mentioned above can be applied to any object: This camera is empty, this camera is unproduced etc. We can reflect like that on everything, for example when

we become jealous of a colleague or when we encounter an enemy. When we travel, we can apply these eight points to our hotel, our bed, and the food. This will bring about a more relaxed mind, which gets neither overexcited nor overly disappointed or angry.

Normally I use this example: What is this piece of cloth? If I wear it loosely around my neck, we believe it must be a scarf. That is one of our general concepts. But if I wear it differently, slung over my upper body, we perceive it as a part of my monk's robe, right? Then you think that this is a monk's robe forever. If it is worn as a turban, will you think it is a scarf? No. Such a simple material thing can be named in three different ways depending on how it is worn. Everyone will believe that their concept is the correct one: having the characteristics of a scarf, having the characteristics of a monk's robe, or having the characteristics of a turban. People could even fight about it. However, clever people who know and apply the Heart Sutra look at this cotton cloth as empty of being a scarf, empty of being a monk's robe, and empty of being a turban. For them it is very easy. From the point of view of interdependent origination the cloth can even be seen as a scarf, a monk's robe and a turban simultaneously. There is no argument. This is the main thing. Now you know how negative emotions are released.

Previously I shared with you that sometimes we try to control our negative emotions by hiding from them, like trying to avoid seeing someone who makes us angry. That is one method. But really, finding a way to be with that person without getting upset is better. Rather than becoming angry, try to look at the person more compassionately or consider their positive attributes. You won't be so easily triggered and you can just sit together. Nevertheless, we might still retain the concept of an enemy - either an enemy we hide from or an enemy for whom we feel compassion. In both cases we are upholding the concept of 'enemy'. Based on the Heart Sutra the ultimate idea is to transcend the very idea of 'enemy'. Doing so, we cannot find an 'enemy' to hide from or to generate compassion for. Going even further, we cannot even find a 'human being'. At the end all objects disappear from our mind. That is the ultimate level of meditation and the ultimate antidote to negative emotions.

That is the actual meaning of the text. Going back to the last three lines:

“Therefore, Sāriputra, since bodhisattvas have no attainment,
They rely on and abide by the perfection of wisdom.
Since their minds are unobscured, they have no fear.
They completely transcend error and reach the ultimate nirvana.”

Having perfected wisdom, your mind is free of any kind of obscuration and without fear of the suffering or danger of samsara. Completely passing beyond error, you reach the endpoint - nirvana. The Tibetan word for nirvana literally means 'passing beyond

sorrow'. Passing beyond sorrow is this: when we practice the view of emptiness, our mind reaches the state of freedom from concepts. That's the main idea.

“All the Buddhas throughout the three times,
Fully awoken to unsurpassable, true,
Complete enlightenment by means of the perfection of wisdom.”

The sutra's last paragraph declares:

“Therefore, the mantra of the perfection of wisdom -
The mantra of great insight, the unsurpassed mantra,
The mantra that equals the unequalled
The mantra that pacifies all suffering -
Is not false and should be understood as true.
The mantra of the perfection of wisdom is proclaimed as follows: ”

The entire meaning of what we have just been talking about can be subsumed in the following mantra. Talking about its benefits, the mind without obscurations is mentioned, but the mind without fear is also what is meant.

“TADYATHA, OM GATE GATE, PARAGATE, PARASAMGATE, BODHI SVAHA
Shariputra, a bodhisattva and great being should train in the profound perfection of wisdom in this way.”

Tadyatha means: “Hear this!”

GATE GATE means: analyze or realize. Having realized the essence of this wisdom - the essence of emptiness - through that the realization will deliver one to Bodhi, enlightenment.

The advice given: this is the way in which to train.

This finishes the answer given to Shariputra.

“Thereupon, the Blessed One arose from that absorption
And commended Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva and great being:
Excellent, excellent, O son of noble family. That is how it is,
That is just how it is.
One should practice the profound perfection of wisdom just as you have taught
And then even the tathagatas will rejoice.”

At the top of the hill the Buddha had sat in meditation with the sangha being present. Through his power, Shariputra and Avalokiteshvara gained the confidence to converse about the subject of Buddha's meditation. Shariputra asked the question and Avalokiteshvara answered. When they finished, the Buddha came out of his meditation

and confirmed that the correct question had been asked and an excellent answer given. He also said, “That is what I am practicing, and everyone should practice just as Avalokiteshvara answered.” He acts like a president who approves of an answer his secretary made on his behalf.

“When the Blessed One had said this,
Venerable Shariputra and Noble Avalokiteshvara, bodhisattva and great being,
Together with the whole assembly and the world of gods, human beings,
Asuras, and gandharvas rejoiced and praised
The speech of the Blessed One.
Thus concludes the Mahayana Sutra of The Blessed Mother,
The Heart of the Transcendent Perfection of Wisdom.”

This is a short version of one of Buddha’s teachings on this subject. In fact 16 volumes were translated into Tibetan about the teachings that were given on this hill, the Vulture Peak, and in the surrounding area. If we take these teachings to heart and gain an insight into emptiness, we will definitely be able to better control our negative emotions. So please apply them.

*Translated from Tibetan and edited by Daniela Hartmann
Transcribed by Kerstin Mick
Final editing by Judith and Wayne Amtzis*