

Commentaries by Master Sheng-yen

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Summer 1996 The Heart Sutra

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The next lines of the *Heart Sutra* read: "There is no suffering, no cause of suffering, no cessation of suffering, and no path." These words negate the Four Noble Truths, which are closely related to the Twelve Links of Conditioned Arising. (The Twelve Links of Conditioned Arising were discussed in the Spring 1996 issue of the *Ch'an Magazine*.) If you are not successful in seeing that the twelve links are empty, then you will remain in samsara, the cycle of birth and death. Samsara is the ocean of suffering. Therefore, if you have trouble contemplating the causes and conditions that are the twelve links, then you should try contemplating the Four Noble Truths instead.

I will approach the four truths in the same way that I did the twelve links, first explaining their meaning and then outlining methods of contemplation. The first level is to intellectually understand the truths. The second level is to contemplate them. The third level is to recognize that the Four Noble Truths are empty, that they do not exist.

If you are unaware that you suffer, then you cannot possibly know the cause of suffering, or the path to the cessation of suffering. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the Four Noble Truths. Yet, that is not enough. You must also master the second level - contemplation - for only through contemplation can you transcend the Four Noble Truths. Without contemplation, you cannot leave behind samsara. Further still, if you are unaware of the third level, then you are a practitioner who is concerned only with leaving suffering behind. Mastering the third level, you realize that the Four Noble Truths are also empty, and that there should be no attachment to them. This is the Mahayana understanding.

If you thoroughly understand the Twelve Links of Conditioned Arising, you will also understand the Four Noble Truths. First, you must understand that suffering is the consequence of your previous actions. It may seem strange that the First Noble Truth - suffering - should precede the second noble truth, the cause of suffering. The natural order is for consequence to follow cause. Why is it reversed in the Four Noble Truths? The answer rests in our understanding of the twelve links. Suffering has been with us since beginningless time. The initial cause is irrelevant. Therefore, we must first start with suffering, and from there point to its cause.

I have already talked about suffering. It derives from birth, aging, sickness and death, which are none other than the Twelve Links of Conditioned Arising. The most fundamental kind of suffering is that which comes from arising and perishing, birth and death. Between birth and death, one tries to survive, and acquire and avoid certain things, which leads to more suffering. There is the

suffering of not getting what one wants, the suffering of the separation of loved ones, the suffering of the coming together of people who hate each other, and the suffering from the continuation of the five skandhas.

The second of the Four Noble Truths, usually translated as "cause of suffering," literally means, "the accumulation of the cause of suffering." In particular, it refers to the ten kinds of karma: three of the mind, three of the body, and four of speech. These ten kinds of karma, or actions, can be virtuous or non-virtuous. Whether they are virtuous or non-virtuous, one must experience their consequences.

Most people think of suffering when they are in pain. They do not think of enjoyable experiences as suffering. However, both are causes of suffering. Suffering can be divided into two general categories. First is suffering that feels like suffering. The second category of suffering comes from the fact that nothing lasts. All good things that come into your life will eventually leave. All things arise and perish. As you reap the benefits of past good karma, you are also diminishing that supply of good karma. There is no guarantee that the stockpile will last forever. Only if you continue to perform good actions with good intentions will the stockpile of good karma remain.

The Second Noble Truth is the fundamental idea of Buddhism called the "principle of conditioned arising from karma." Particular actions create karma which leads to particular consequences. It is the principle of conditioned arising: anything which arises comes from various conditions coming together, and, in particular, the coming together of karma that one has created.

Practice is a kind of accumulation, so it too is part of the second noble truth. Practicing, helping sentient beings and performing virtuous activities, since they are performed with a mind of attachment, are part of the accumulation of the causes of suffering. By continuing to practice, however, you can reach the point where you no longer see yourself helping others; rather, you see sentient beings helping themselves. This is good because you will no longer be thinking about reaping rewards for your deeds. But this is not the final level. Ultimately, you will reach the level where you no longer feel that there are sentient beings to help, either by you or by themselves. This is truly a state of emptiness and non-attachment. At this level, there will be no more accumulation of the causes of suffering.

The Third Noble Truth is the cessation of suffering. How do you stop the accumulation of the causes of suffering? It is no good to say, "I don't want any more suffering." You cannot stop a pot of soup from boiling merely by stirring it. You have to remove the fire beneath the pot. With suffering, you must first accept the consequences of your previous actions. Simultaneously, you must curtail creating more karma. If you owe debts, you must pay them back. At the same time, you must stop borrowing. The question is, should we also stop performing virtuous actions? After all, they also create karma. The answer is no. However, you should perform virtuous actions without thoughts of accumulating good merit. Such thoughts would be a form of desire.

Conceptually, we may understand that we need to stop suffering and falling prey to the causes of suffering, but it is difficult to do so because our karmic burdens are heavy. That is why we need the Fourth Noble Truth, the Path. The Path can help us slowly and gradually stop suffering and accumulating the causes of suffering. The Path is the practice of precepts, samadhi and wisdom.

In practicing the precepts we perform the ten virtuous actions and refrain from performing the ten non-virtuous actions. The precepts are a guideline for behavior. With the precepts in mind, you will check your behavior. And when you break a precept, you will likely repent your action. With practice, your behavior will improve and become smoother and more natural. This will cut down on the accumulation of the causes of suffering, or at least the accumulation of non-virtuous actions.

The term "samadhi" does not solely refer to deep levels of mental absorption. It also refers to maintaining the calmness of one's mind. It's knowing constantly what kind of actions we perform and what kind of thoughts we have. When we are constantly clear about our mental state, there will be fewer opportunities to create the causes of suffering.

There are two kinds of wisdom: wisdom with outflows and wisdom without outflows. "Outflow" means one is still attached to a self. "Without outflows" means one is no longer attached to a self. Obviously, wisdom with outflows arises first. A person in whom such wisdom has arisen does not have genuine wisdom, but relies on the Buddha's wisdom. Such a person keeps the precepts, studies the Dharma and practices samadhi. Since one who has wisdom without outflows is no longer attached to a self, he or she no longer has vexations, no longer creates karma or abides in suffering. Having wisdom with outflows is like trying to inflate a balloon with a slow leak. It needs constant attention to stay full. If you leave it alone, it will deflate. If you perform virtuous actions with a self-centered mentality, then you will create suffering. The good karma you reap will eventually diminish.

If we know that we suffer, then the actual feeling of suffering will not be so bad. If we are unaware of suffering, then it can, indeed, be overwhelming. For example, I am sure everyone has experienced embarrassment, pain, torment or harassment from acquaintances and strangers. That in itself is suffering, but if you cannot let go of your attachment to those events and feelings, then you have increased your suffering. You may obsessively replay scenes over and over, thinking about what you should have done or could have said. You may even go so far as to keep tabs on these people whom you would have otherwise forgotten. They have caused you trouble and pain, yet you cannot forget them or let them go; and the more you dwell on them and your experience, the more you suffer. Often, we experience more suffering reliving these experiences than we do experiencing them, and we become so enmeshed in our thoughts and feelings that we are not even aware that we are suffering. But once we recognize a situation as one of suffering, then we are in a better position to let it go and stop dwelling on it. This is good practice. If we cultivate this skill, then even if we are again troubled by such people or events, actual suffering will be minimized. For practitioners, clearly recognizing when suffering arises is, in fact, contemplating suffering - the First Noble Truth.

Next is contemplating the causes of suffering. When you suffer, you may think it is because of some external reason - you are the victim. On the other hand, if you contemplate the causes of suffering, you'll recognize that suffering does not come without cause; and the cause of suffering is not outside, but within yourself. Truly knowing this will reduce suffering.

Contemplating the causes of suffering also means knowing that performing certain actions will lead to certain consequences. Hence, to avoid suffering, you must first refrain from doing non-virtuous actions. Second, even when you perform virtuous actions, you should not be concerned with enjoying the consequence of your virtuous actions. Do not dwell on pride or arrogance.

Third is contemplating the cessation of suffering. Really, this is tied to the first two Noble Truths. When you know suffering and the cause of it, that itself is cessation. It is knowing that suffering arises from causes and conditions and therefore cannot be genuine. Accumulation of the cause of suffering also arises from causes and conditions, and is not genuine. For example, if you realize that money and thoughts relating to it are dependent on causes and conditions, then having it, not having it, working hard for it, or losing it, will not cause suffering. There's no reason to get attached to it. If you are successful in this contemplation, suffering will be gone.

Contemplating cessation is difficult. It is easier and better to contemplate the path that leads to the cessation of suffering.

Contemplating the path means that you constantly remain on and practice the path. There are people who think of themselves as great practitioners. They point to the number of years they have practiced and the experiences they have had. This attitude actually leads them away from the path.

Unless you are fully enlightened, then suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path, still exist for you. Only when you experience genuine wisdom do the Four Noble Truths reveal themselves as being empty and illusory. That is wisdom without outflows.

The *Heart Sutra* goes one step further. If you say that generating genuine wisdom eliminates suffering, then you are still attached to the idea of wisdom. That is why the next line of the sutra says, "There is no wisdom or any attainment." The *Heart Sutra's* method is to remove all attachments from your mind, step by step. Most people cannot let go of one thing unless they have already grasped something else. The *Heart Sutra* speaks to this habit, and systematically removes all sources of attachment, until there is nothing left.

Winter 1997 The Heart Sutra

The thirteenth lecture in a series delivered by Shih-fu to students attending a special class at the Ch'an Center.

The Heart Sutra continues: "With nothing to attain, Bodhisattvas, relying on prajna-paramita, have no obstructions in their minds." What is meant by obstructions and mind? In the English translation of the sutra, we have already come across the term "mind" a few times, but, of the 260 Chinese characters that make up the Heart Sutra, this is the first use of the character for "mind." This is the mind that the Diamond Sutra speaks of when it says, "The mind arises without abiding."

"Abiding" means attachment, so the mind that the Diamond Sutra speaks of is different from the minds of ordinary people. For ordinary people, there is never a mind without abiding. Whether the mind is clear, scattered, tormented, calm, filled with hatred or loving-kindness, it is still a mind that abides. The Diamond Sutra says, however, that even in a state of non-abiding, the mind still arises, or functions. It is the mind that arises without abiding which the Heart Sutra makes reference to in the lines above. The mind that arises without abiding belongs to one who has left behind self-centeredness. It is the mind of one who is liberated.

A Ch'an poem describes the mind after enlightenment as clouds among tall mountains. It may seem that the clouds come from and return to the mountains, but in reality the clouds move around and are not obstructed by mountains. Undoubtedly, these clouds exist, yet they have no definite form and substance, and they are not obstructed by anything on earth or in the sky. Liberated beings, having no obstructions in their minds, are like clouds among mountains. Although their minds are unobstructed, they are still able to function, just as clouds may provide shade and precipitation.

Ordinary beings may think they understand this mind, but they grasp it only through analogy. It takes personal experience, in fact enlightenment, to truly understand it. In truth, there is no mind and there are no obstructions. Furthermore, you cannot have one without the other. If there is no mind, there will be no obstructions; and if there are no obstructions, there can be no mind.

As practitioners, we can only contemplate the mind with obstructions. It is impossible for us to contemplate the mind without obstructions. There's no such thing. Any thought associated with a self, or any attachment, or any vexation, is an obstruction. These things obstruct wisdom, or the awakening of Bodhi.

The Chinese character translated as "obstruction" also has the connotation of "illness." A mind that abides has many attachments and vexations and fundamentally cannot be at ease. As an analogy, when the body is healthy and working smoothly, most people are unaware of it. Only when it aches does one become aware of the body. The same is true for the mind, but even more so. We are always tied to or at odds with one thing or another and are never fully at ease. But when all attachments depart, we call that the mind without obstruction.

Sometimes, it may seem you are at ease and your life and mind do function smoothly: after a restful sleep, perhaps, or when there are no troubles in your life. These times are short-lived, however, and obstructions soon return. Also, there are subtle vexations that are ever present, whether or not you are aware of them. Most of us are aware only of the most obvious vexations. Anything and everything can be an obstruction and cause vexations to arise in our minds. One I am sure everyone is familiar with is getting caught in traffic when you have a pressing

engagement. And things that normally do not cause vexations may do so if you are already obstructed by something else. For instance, the same enthusiastic child may be a joy if your time is free or a nuisance if you are tired or preoccupied.

One purpose of practice is to help one become more aware of mental obstructions and how they affect our thoughts, speech and actions. In maintaining such awareness, obstructions will naturally and gradually lessen.

The reason why we have obstructions is because we do not recognize that the five skandhas and the Twelve Links of Conditioned Arising are empty. Of course, if we truly understood this, we would already be enlightened and there would be no need for contemplation. Until we are enlightened, however, we need to contemplate the mind and how it reacts to obstructions.

The next two lines say, "Having no obstructions, there is no fear, and departing far from confusion and imaginings..."

When the mind has problems, there will be obstructions, and when there are obstructions, there will be fears, such as the fear that what one has will be lost, or the fear that one will not gain what one desires. People fear what they know and what they do not know; they fear the future as well as the past. People purposely do things to scare themselves, such as going to horror movies or riding on roller coasters. Why would anyone want to do this? The answer is that we cannot help it.

We have fear because we do not feel safe. We feel threatened, whether it be our health, our security, our ideas, our perceptions, our feelings, or any number of other things. Fear stems from our attachment to ourselves. We see ourselves as being permanent, but we must come to directly realize that everything about ourselves is transient and constantly changing. To come to such awareness requires contemplation.

An elderly gentleman came to me seeking advice. He confided that he was not so much afraid of death as he was afraid that others were taking advantage of him. He said he spent all of his time giving to others, yet people always wanted more. For him, death was not a threat, but a release from this other fear.

I told him we all come to this world for different reasons, but that they can be grouped into three large categories. Some come to this world solely to pay back previous debts. Others come to borrow, or accumulate, more debt. Still others come to lend things, or help others. The elderly man was then happy, deciding that he had returned to the world in order to repay old debts and give things away. This man is not enlightened, so he still has fears, but, with a better understanding of cause and consequence and an acceptance of karma, his fears have been lessened.

Once we understand the nature of our fears, they will no longer be a problem. The first order of business, though, is to realize that we do have fears. We must be able to acknowledge and identify them. Of course, if we were to eliminate our self-centeredness, all fears would disappear. To truly have no fear you must contemplate the emptiness of the self and the five skandhas.

In the line, "departing far from confusion and imaginings," the word translated as confusion literally means "inversion" or "upside-down view." It refers to the four major inverted views: perceiving suffering to be happiness; perceiving impurity to be purity; perceiving impermanence to be permanence; perceiving selflessness to be self. I have explained all of these before, in one form or another. Basically, suffering arises because of our misperceptions regarding such matters.

The term "imaginings" might be better understood as "dreaming." Dreaming comes in many forms. Making unrealistic plans is a form of dreaming. For example, reading about a millionaire and imagining that you are that person, fantasizing about how you made the money and what you will do with your riches, is a dream. After all, what do you know about the causes and conditions of other people? Everyone is different. People have their own characteristics, their own karma. Some people live their entire lives dreaming of a different life, never even trying to realize it. Others dream another life and try to make a go of it, either successfully or unsuccessfully. They, too, do not realize they are dreaming. Others realize that they are dreaming about another life and will themselves to awaken. In this case, I am not talking about awakening to enlightenment, but merely waking up from completely unrealistic dreams to a more sober, clearer outlook.

For beginning practitioners, "departing far from confusion and imaginings" means trying to maintain a mind of clarity and sobriety. The goal of practice is to awaken from the dream of the self. This is enlightenment. Once liberated, one no longer dreams a life. There is no more, "I want to do this and I don't want to do that." Instead, one simply responds to the environment and to the needs of others, naturally and spontaneously doing the right thing.

We cannot contemplate what it is like to depart from confusion and imaginings; rather, we must contemplate confusion and imaginings directly. It is similar to contemplating obstructions and fears. When you experience deep vexation, such as greed or anger, and are suffering, ask yourself, "Am I experiencing confusion?" What is it that is causing you to have such strong vexation and suffering? It is time to reflect on your thoughts, moods, intentions. It is time to reflect on the four inverted views.

We can begin by reflecting on whether or not we are dreaming. Sometimes we will not know until afterwards, when everything has already fallen apart. That is a good start. Seeing afterward that it was all a dream will lessen your vexation. With practice, you will realize you are dreaming while you are in the middle of a dream. That is better, because whether the dream is painful or pleasurable, you will realize it is only a transient illusion and will not become attached to it. That is deep practice. Finally, you will awaken altogether from the dream of life, the dream of the self, the dream of ignorance. That is liberation.

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The fourteenth and last lecture in a series delivered by Shih-fu to students attending a special class at the Ch'an Center.

In this lecture we will come to the end of the Heart Sutra. The next line of the Heart Sutra reads, "They [Bodhisattvas] reach ultimate nirvana." There are three kinds of nirvana, two of which are not ultimate nirvana. The first is the nirvana of the outer paths. The second is the nirvana of arhats whose goal of practice was self-liberation. The third -- ultimate nirvana -- is that of the Mahayana path.



There is no specific outer-path nirvana. Generally, outer-path practitioners mistake unity of self with a god as ultimate nirvana. They may believe it is the ultimate state and that they will no longer have vexations or continue on the wheel of samsara. This is considered the nirvana of the outer path.

God, in this case, may represent one of two things. One refers to that condition when a practitioner feels unified with a personal, anthropomorphic god. The other refers to the condition when a practitioner feels unified with everything, the highest, the ultimate. It can be called pantheism. Such a practitioner feels he or she has returned to that purest or highest of states, a kind of universal embodiment. It can also be called the Godhead.

People who have experienced returning to a personal god feel reborn in heaven. Those who have returned to the Godhead feel they have disappeared or merged with the universe. Most people would consider either of these experiences as liberation or nirvana.

Outer-path nirvana can be attained by one of two methods. The first is by invoking and receiving the help or grace of a deity. This method would work for attaining unity with a personal god. Actually, one does not merge with a god; rather, one lives in the presence or light of that god. Also, this method would not work for unifying with the Godhead. To attain that kind of outer-path nirvana, one must practice. Practice includes cultivating merit and virtue by following the precepts as well as cultivating samadhi power.

The reason why the first kind of nirvana is considered outer path is because being reborn in or brought to a heaven is not considered eternal from a Buddhist viewpoint. It is only a temporary condition. Further, it is questionable whether the god has even transcended samsara. The second kind of nirvana is similar to the experience of dissolving into nature or expanding to a large self. Such an experience will also not last because the power of samadhi and the power derived from merit and virtue will wane.

Practitioners who practice for self-liberation and who have attained arhatship are liberated from all vexations. They no longer create the causes that bring vexation. Hence, they no longer create the cause to be reborn or remain in samsara. They are truly free from vexations and samsara. But what about the causes they have created in the past before attaining liberation? Retribution as such only comes to those who still have self-attachment. People with attachment definitely receive karmic retribution for past actions. Those without self-attachment also must undergo the karmic consequences of their past actions, but because they have no attachment to self, they do not see it as retribution. Therefore, those who attain arhatship and transcend self-attachment do

not feel the retribution for previous actions, whether they be good, bad, or neutral. It does not matter what they did. Also, from the Mahayana perspective, those who attain arhatship may convert over to the Mahayana path. In that case, they will reappear in the world to help sentient beings. In returning to help others, bodhisattvas pay back previous debts owed to others.

The third nirvana is that of the Mahayana path and is the goal of bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas attain the goal without fear, confusion, or imaginings. Bodhisattvas have no attachment to life or the world. On the other hand, they choose to remain in the world to help others, unlike Hinayana arhats. To bodhisattvas, samsara is the Pure Land. Bodhisattvas still function in samsara and are not separate from the world of ordinary sentient beings, but they do not have the vexations that ordinary sentient beings have. Bodhisattvas remain in samsara, but their mental states are the same as that of arhats.

How do we contemplate ultimate nirvana? In daily life, we must understand that avoiding situations which may cause vexations is not appropriate. Running away is not good. Neither is denial or pretending that the situation does not exist. It is best to accept the situation without vexations in mind and to deal with situations without being disturbed. Of course this is difficult to do. But even though we are nowhere near attaining ultimate nirvana, we can still learn from and emulate the Buddha. We can try to adopt the ways and attitudes of a Buddha.

The Heart Sutra continues: "All past, present and future Buddhas, relying on prajnaparamita, attain anuttara-samyak-sambodhi." 'Past Buddhas' refers to all sentient beings who have become Buddhas in all worlds. 'Present Buddhas' refers to all the Buddhas that are around now in the innumerable worlds. In Buddhism, we call this the ten directions. 'Future Buddhas' includes all bodhisattvas, and in fact, all sentient beings.

The next line recaps the beginning of the sutra. There is no need to re-explain prajnaparamita. When you finally transcend attachment to self, that is wisdom without outflows. In the beginning of the sutra, it was a bodhisattva, namely Avalokitesvara, who was relying on prajnaparamita. Now, at the end of the sutra, we are referring to Buddhas.

Avalokitesvara is a great bodhisattva. It is very difficult for ordinary sentient beings to compare great bodhisattvas and Buddhas. One distinction, however, is that bodhisattvas have not attained ultimate nirvana.

Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi is a Sanskrit term. Anuttara means "highest." Samyak means "perfect." Sambodhi refers to perfect, complete, all-pervasive realization. It is the realization of Buddhas.

"Therefore know that prajnaparamita is the great mantra of power, the great mantra of wisdom, the supreme mantra, the unequaled mantra, which removes all sufferings. It is real and not false." These lines are straightforward. The sutra is emphasizing that prajna has the power of delivering sentient beings. Mantras are thought to have great power, and so prajna is described in this manner. Mantras are believed to be able to hold everything and not allow anything to leak out. Therefore, this particular mantra holds great wisdom, powerful enough to remove all sufferings.

"Therefore, recite the mantra of prajnaparamita. Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha." Actually, these last two lines are not found in the original sutra. Also, the last line is not a mantra, even though it is in the form of a mantra. True mantras, which originated in India, are composed of sounds which are the seeds of words; and although mantras can have meanings, they are not specific. The meanings are usually rich and varied. Also, mantras are usually not translatable. The sounds in this mantra are true words which have specific meanings. They are left untranslated so that they appear to be a mantra.

The meaning of this "mantra" is that we should use prajna to transcend all sufferings and attain Buddhahood. "Gate" (pronounced: ga-tay) means "go." Paragate means "to the shore beyond." In this case, the shore refers to ultimate nirvana. Parasamgate means that all of us, all together, are to go to the shore beyond. I, the practitioner, do not wish to cross the ocean alone. I want everyone to cross. This is the bodhisattva spirit. Bodhi Svaha is the perfection of Buddhahood. Svaha means "completion" or "perfection." All together, the line means: "Go, go, go to the shore beyond. Everybody go together to the shore beyond and complete the bodhi path."

As practitioners, we should view this entire sutra as the mantra of wisdom and power. In reciting the Heart Sutra, we are immersing ourselves in the core of Buddhism. That is why we recite this sutra every day. It can help us to rid ourselves of vexation and delusion. It can help us to attain enlightenment.