



The Heart Sutra

Unpacking A Path to Freedom

Commentary for the Serious Novice

Preface

The short version of the *Heart Sutra*, for which this is a commentary, dates to roughly the 1st century CE and is about a page long. Longer versions go to hundreds and hundreds of pages, but this standard short version is the best (and most accessible) – it elegantly contains almost all of the principle doctrines of Buddhism. This brevity is underscored by its name - the Heart Sutra can be thought of as the figurative “heart” of the sutras concerned with explicating the emptiness of all phenomena.

The first sentence, for example, introduces us to Avalokiteshvara, the archetype for compassion, compassion being the focus of one of the two primary Buddhist traditions (wisdom is the focus of the other primary tradition.) In addition, it invokes the five aggregates, the internally constructed psychophysical model for how we create phenomena (especially Self). Implied in this is a method to deconstruct our narratives to make them less unsatisfactory, and to show how karma arises. It also sets forth the relation between meditation, wisdom, and, finally, ending suffering. All of this content has implications for practice to relieve anxiety and stress. Not bad for one short sentence, but problematic for a newcomer to Buddhism as it is virtually incomprehensible without a serious doctrinal background or an adept teacher. Cryptic and compressed would be good descriptors, even for those with a significant Buddhist background.

This commentary is a gesture at making the Heart Sutra more accessible to novices, or even to longtime practitioners who are looking to strengthen their practices. It is not academic or scholastic, but rather it is meant to simplify the text to make it useful in practice, or at least as simple as reasonable for such dense material. It is not definitive, and does not aim to reconcile the many different versions and interpretations of the Heart Sutra that have arisen throughout the centuries. As with other commentaries at *deepdharma.org*, it is meant as a practical guide to understanding the key foundational doctrines embedded in the text.

When Carl first began to practice in 1993 he chanted this sutra each evening as part of the service. He found it incomprehensible. So he took a Heart Sutra class at a local Zen Center. It left him more befuddled than before. Not only was Carl having trouble understanding it, but the monk leading the class was having trouble explaining it, and Carl wondered if that monk even understood it himself. He asked the Abbot of his Temple to explain it and was told, in typical Zen-style, “just go sit some more.” But years of sitting (sitting = meditating) and it still wasn’t obvious. Even the long post-service talks with other members of the sangha failed to clarify it, so he put it aside for twenty years, but his interest has been revived as a result of having been asked to give dharma talks in Milwaukee and St. Louis on the five aggregates and the sutra.

We should note here for the reader that our interpretation doesn’t rely on one tradition, nor does it rely on the interpretation of one group or sect. Rather it leans heavily into teachings from the earliest canon, the Pali canon, and the later Sanskrit canon, sometimes referred to as the Wisdom Teachings. The commentary also leans, to a lesser degree, on the later Tibetan and Zen interpretations. We haven’t allowed time or culture to limit our presentation—there are Sri Lankan teachings, Thai teachings, Sanskrit teachings, Chinese teachings, Tibetan teachings, Japanese teaching, all amalgamated to form a practice raft to float the reader “to the other shore,” as the sutra says.

Reading the Heart Sutra immediately makes obvious why there is such a wide variety of interpretive and practical traditions surrounding it. With the density of the text, every word can be seen as “diverting one to practice,” by raising questions and associations immediately to mind. This is thrilling, but also confusing, so we emphasize that this commentary is but one plank in the structure of the raft – we hope it helps to provide a starting point for your interpretation and practice with the Heart Sutra, and facilitates your access to this world of engrossing complexity.

In Section One there are three translations of the text, chosen because of their authoritativeness and their varied language and style. In Section Two, the commentary appears as an uninterrupted text. In Section Three, the three translations of the *Heart Sutra* are annotated by interposing the relevant sections of the commentary found in Section Two. When the *Heart Sutra* is being quoted directly, it will be followed by initials—(PW) indicating the Whalen text, (SZ) indicating the Soto Zen text, and (NH) indicating the Nhat Hahn text. Defined words and phrases are in bold or set forth in a box.

Although arguments can be made that certain words should be left in Sanskrit, we have chosen to use English as much as possible to facilitate an ease of accessibility to the text. We do this bearing in mind that this is an introduction to the *Heart Sutra* for the serious practitioner, not an academic presentation or an exegesis.

It sounds more complicated than it is. Once you have spent a few minutes with the text, you’ll see how the pieces fit together rather easily. We suggest you study this commentary in the order presented, Section One, then Two, and then Three.

Andy Cohen
Carl Jerome
December 2020

Commentary

Section One

Various Translations

Heart Sutra, Version from Roshi Philip Whalen

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva
When practicing deeply the prajna paramita
Perceived that all five skandhas in their own being are empty
And was saved from all suffering.
“O Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness;
Emptiness does not differ from form.
That which is form is emptiness;
That which is emptiness, form.
The same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses, consciousness.
O Shariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness;
They do not appear or disappear,
Are not tainted nor pure,
Do not increase or decrease.
Therefore in emptiness, no form,
No feelings, no perceptions, no impulses, no consciousness;
No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind;
No color, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind;
No realm of eyes until no realm of mind-consciousness;
No ignorance and also no extinction of it until no old-age-and-death
And also no extinction of it;
No suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path;
No cognition, also no attainment.
With nothing to attain
The bodhisattvas depend on prajna paramita
And their minds are no hindrance.
Without any hindrance no fears exist;
Far apart from every perverted view they dwell in Nirvana.
In the three worlds all Buddhas depend on prajna paramita
And attain unsurpassed complete perfect Enlightenment.
Therefore know the prajna paramita
Is the great transcendent mantra,
Is the great bright mantra,
Is the utmost mantra,
Is the supreme mantra,

Which is able to relieve all suffering
And is true, not false.
So proclaim, the prajna paramita mantra,
Proclaim the mantra that says:
Gate, gate, paragate, parasangate! Bodhi! Svaha!”

Current Official Soto Zen Translation, 2020

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, when deeply practicing prajna paramita, clearly saw that all five aggregates are empty and thus relieved all suffering. Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself form. Sensations, perceptions, formations and consciousness are also like this. Shariputra, all dharmas are marked by emptiness; they neither arise nor cease, are neither defiled nor pure, neither increase nor decrease. Therefore, given emptiness, there is no form, no sensation, no perception, no formation, no consciousness; no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no sight, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind; no realm of sight...no realm of mind consciousness. There is neither ignorance nor extinction of ignorance...neither old age and death, nor extinction old age and death; no suffering, no cause, no cessation, no path; no knowledge and no attainment. With nothing to attain, a bodhisattva relies on prajna paramita, and thus the mind is no hindrance. Without hindrance, there is no fear. Far beyond all inverted views, one realizes nirvana. All buddhas of past, present and future rely on prajna paramita and thereby attain unsurpassed complete perfect enlightenment. Therefore know the prajna paramita as the great miraculous mantra, the great bright mantra, the supreme mantra, the incomparable mantra, which removes all suffering and is true, not false. Therefore we proclaim the prajna paramita mantra, the mantra that says: gate, gate, paragate, parasangate, bodhi svaha.

Thich Nhat Hahn’s “Modern” Version

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 Purity,
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!”

Section Two: Commentary without Annotations

All three versions (see Section One above) begin with the name *Avalokiteshvara*. Two, Whalen's and the Soto Zen, follow the name with its traditional honorific *Bodhisattva*; Nhat Hahn's is the name alone.

Avalokiteshvara is the archetype of compassion; the name means one who hears and responds to the cries of the world. Bodhisattva is a title given to someone in Buddhist mythology who has reached liberation, but rather than going off to live in nirvana, in the "world of enlightenment," has decided to stay here with us in samsara, this "world of suffering." Although this is taken literally by most Buddhists, it best serves us when considered a metaphor since emptiness teaches us that there is no nirvana nor samsara as independent entities. Nirvana and samsara are better thought of as states of being or perception, rather than separate worlds to be inhabited. This focus on the true nature of emptiness is the major focus of the Heart Sutra. In shorthand, being a Bodhisattva is a bit like having one foot in each state of being, and hopping back and forth as needed.

Avalokiteshvara was originally just an imaginary archetype; later she was thought of as a real person, and most recently, she became a god in the Chinese and Tibetan pantheons. She is female (*Guanyin*) in China but male in Japan (*Kanzeon* or *Kannon*) and Tibet (*Chenrizig*), and in Tibet the Dalai Lama is believed to be the reincarnate Avalokiteshvara. Her statues sometimes show her as having both female and male physical characteristic and dress.

So, this sutra is a teaching/lecture from Avalokiteshvara (the Bodhisattva of Compassion) to Shariputra (one of the historic Buddha's main disciples). The presence of Shariputra in this sutra indicates that the main topic will be emptiness. (See pt. III below for a description of the principle of emptiness.)

Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva, was "practicing deeply the prajna paramita." In other words, she was deeply meditating on emptiness when she realized that each of the five aggregates (skandhas) are empty and also that the combination of the five together are empty.

Once she realized this, that the five were empty, all her suffering (*dukkha*) just dropped away. Realizing that each of the aggregates and all of them together are empty led Avalokiteshvara to realize that there was No-Self/ Non-Self. Why? Because there was nothing to attach to (no components of a Self and no set of things that added together would make a Self), either internal, external, or purely imaginary. And when we stop attaching to our stories, stop believing that things exist in the way the mind is reifying them, stop believing that there is an independent Self, we are freed from the unsatisfactoriness we have concocted to explain how all phenomena happen and in happening cause us to suffer.

To end her suffering, Avalokiteshvara had to realize that it was believing the stories about herself that her mind created in the aggregates, all of which give us the illusion that we are here, in the exact, permanent way our minds presents us to us, was what led to one's suffering. Ending one's suffering, reaching liberation, means profoundly realizing No-Self and being able to generalize it to Non-Self (i.e., no Selves exist anywhere). It means seeing in meditation that the illusory Self is empty, meaning just an illusion. It means ending our clinging to that Self presented to us by our minds.

We can do this too. We can learn not to believe that our sense contacts exist in the way we are perceiving them. We can learn not to believe or even assign an affinity or an aversion to every sense contact. We can realize, as Avalokiteshvara did, that these sense contact phenomena, and the next aggregate, the assignment of significant import to these sense contacts are not so significant that we must fabricate a narrative (a story, a fiction) instructing us what to do about each sense contact and its falsely assigned affect. That's the first three aggregates, a la Avalokiteshvara. Next, and this is still pre-cognitive, she, like all of us, would go into her karmic storehouse (the alaya storehouse), create some narratives from fragments of older stories, and then send each story to consciousness, to conscious awareness—thereby becoming the kind of person who loves dark chocolate but hates salted milk chocolate coated peanuts.

Learning first that each of these five aggregates is empty and learning to understand how these five aggregates progress from sense contact to consciousness is the beginning of this highway to liberation. The more we practice with it, the more peaceful we become.

Shariputra is next being told that form, form here meaning the body, but extends to include all phenomena, is empty, without an independent, permanent self-essence. But further Shariputra is being told that emptiness itself is empty. So form is empty and emptiness is form—no difference. We infer emptiness from form, and form from emptiness. Put another way, as entities (forms) are ultimately unfindable, this absence that is emptiness cannot be non-empty and findable. This recognition uncovers the ultimate truth that emptiness is empty, and arises in companionship with the realization that form too is emptiness. This is one of the more difficult ideas for novices, and even for serious practitioners, so be patient as you consider it and its implications.

To summarize, Avalokiteshvara is restating her understanding, realized in meditation, that if the first aggregate, which we translate as “sense contact,” is empty, the other four aggregates—feeling, cognition, volitional formations, and consciousness are also empty. Avalokiteshvara is emphasizing, that everything, especially the five aggregates are emptiness and emptiness is everything.

“Listen up, Dude,” Avalokiteshvara seems to be saying, “understanding that everything is empty leads us to further understandings, all of which, separately and together, are rafts to end suffering.” Here the raft is, again, the duality/non-dual raft: the true nature of emptiness is characterized by no-birth and not no-birth, no-being and not no-being; no defilement and no not-defiled (pure); and no increasing and not no-increasing (decreasing).

This is a universal message: since ultimate reality is empty/non-dual, there can only be dependent origination - there is no separateness of phenomena in ultimate reality, and thus concepts like “Self,” “this thing,” “that thing,” “causation,” “if this, then necessarily that” can have no meaning outside the purely shortcut, descriptive nature of dependent arising. If all things are empty of inherent characteristics, then in fact there are no independently-existing (i.e., permanent) “things” at all, which means that there are only the impermanent conditions leading to the conventional existence of the empty Self.

Then Avalokiteshvara goes on to explain that emptiness is everything and everywhere, and can only be characterized by what it is not rather than what it is. This is, as stated above, because

emptiness is not a thing or place, it is an inferred characteristic, or, more properly, lack of any characteristics. Emptiness is an adjective, not a noun. So what is emptiness *not*?

Emptiness is when there is not origination (no beginning, no birth), and not any extinction (no ending, no death); no permanence nor eternalism and no non-existence; it is when nothing is tainted, nor defiled and nothing is pure (has any independent existence at all) from its own side. Since all phenomena can be seen as not having any of these qualities in reality (origination, permanence, pureness), all is empty.

There are no such thing as beginnings or endings, or for that matter, no such qualitative valuation characterizing phenomena as defiled or pure, because these are merely qualities created by our minds, not qualities inherent in phenomena, in people, places, things, etc. And in emptiness, everything is pacific, there is neither increasing nor decreasing. Our ultimate nature is completely and utterly still and empty. Nothing is arising and ceasing, appearing or disappearing, or for the same reason, nothing is tainted or pure—they are just more categories created by mind. Emptiness has none of these characteristics, which are not inherently there but are only nominal understandings, merely words.

Avalokiteshvara now further explains emptiness to Shariputra by further deconstructing the five aggregates and then the 18 sense realms, and asserting that all (the five and the 18) are empty.

As with all things, because they are empty, Avalokiteshvara says that the five aggregates can be understood as not separate and independent. Again, we are told that each of the aggregates is empty of an independent existence — no necessary qualities - meaning that there is no origination of them and no extinction of them; no permanence to them and no non-existence to them; that they are neither defiled or pure; and, they are neither increasing nor decreasing.

Tightening her argument, Avalokiteshvara immediately moves to asserting that the 18 realms in the first aggregates are empty. The 18 result from there being 3 realms for each of our six senses: a physical organ (eyes, for example), a contact with which that organ makes contact (visible stuff) and an eye consciousness (awareness of seeing). This is a further breakdown of the first aggregates which was explained in the opening of the sutra. Again, by implication and deduction, that makes all five of the aggregates empty and establishes that there is No Self. Why? Because the model or schema for defining our psychophysical Self is the Five Aggregates. We know this for sure because if we observe how we perceive phenomena we will see that this is the way we construct the Self. We can also perceive the aggregates arising during deep meditation, like Avalokiteshvara was practicing at the beginning of the sutra.

Here's how the 18 realms look in a chart:

Sense Organ:	Eyes	Ears	Nose	Tongue	Body	Mind
Sense Object:	Visibles	Sounds	Odors	Tastes	Tactile Sensations	Thoughts

Consciousnesses:	Eye Consciousness	Ear Consciousness	Nose Consciousness	Tongue Consciousness	Tactile Consciousness	Mind Consciousness
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Avalokiteshvara is emphasizing that every one of these 18 sense realms is empty. Every one of these 18 lacks permanence, lacks objective, independent existence “from its own side.” For example, our eyes lack permanence; the way they respond to stimuli lacks definition, meaning, value, and function.

If we believe things as they appear, then there is a chasing after those things we want...but there is nothing there. No matter how much we chase, there is no payoff. The pleasure we expect doesn't happen, and eventually we realize that there is no Me (No Self) to do the chasing.

Understanding the concept of No Self can be profoundly difficult for beginner and novice practitioners, and difficult too even for those with decades old practices. For a fuller exposition and alternative ways to attack the image of No-Self, see *deepdharma.org*.

Next Avalokiteshvara cryptically explains to Shariputra another model for creating Self, but this one also explains how we create our suffering, the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising. Below we unpack a version of a 12-Links description from the renowned 20th century Thai monk, Buddhadasa.

The Twelve Links delineate how our Self and our suffering arise, beginning with unformed ignorance and ending with death. This is a comprehensive model for how phenomena arise— in dependence on other things, not separately or independently as they seem to appear to our ignorance mind. In the scriptural literature there are several different 12 point models, here we use the one, in two different formats, that fits with the list of negated phenomena in the Heart Sutra.

We start with a short description, to give the reader a taste for the twelve links (Section Three of this commentary contains a more thorough explanation.)

Short Version: Our (1) **ignorance** of how things are (empty) leads us to concoct (2) **stories**. These stories tell us how to act, speak, and think, and leave imprints (karmic dispositions) on our (3) **consciousness**. Our consciousness makes us aware of our (4) **mind-body**. As the mind-body arises as an ignorant, but active being, we become aware that we are being driven by (5) **sense contacts**. These are accompanied by the addition of (6) **feeling tones** (affinities and aversions). These feelings lead us to (7) **craving** for more, either of those contacts we have an affinity for, or to rid ourselves of more of those we are aversive toward. Craving leads us to (8) **clinging**, but not to the things we are craving, rather to our Self, our stories about what we want or want to be rid of. Our attachment to Self's stories leads us to wanting to continue our (9) **existence**, wanting us to continue becoming our Self through continuing with the stream of stories that delude us into thinking there is a Self. This continuation is, metaphorically speaking, our next (10) **rebirth**. With rebirth as the next condition, (11 & 12) **aging and death** follow and then the whole cycle starts again.

Although it seems counterintuitive, the mind is the problem, as we learn here, *not* the solution. After all, it is the mind that assigns affinities and aversions to phenomena, causing us to become greedy, angry, and deluded. To rephrase Descartes' famous dictum more accurately: “(not) I

think, therefore (not) I suffer.” That is a critical part of understanding the opening lines of the Sutra, which is particularly manifest with respect to the second of the Five Aggregates—feeling, meaning adding a false feeling tone to all our sense contacts. This being so, then where do we turn to become liberated? Bodhisattvas, we learn here (again harking back to the opening lines of the Sutra), depend on prajna paramita – contemplation leading (we hope) to an immediate experience of emptiness—the wisdom that is beyond mind, beyond language, beyond conceptualization, beyond duality. That’s the wisdom that eliminates all hindrances, all obstacles in the mind, and critically, results in all fear and wrong views becoming recognizably nonexistent.

With Right View, the view that is beyond views, there is no attainment, and nothing to be attained, so there are no hindrances or obstacles to being utterly peaceful, to being in the world without fear, meaning without fear of non-attainment. Yes, the *Heart Sutra* is telling us, we can live without fear! And we do it with, amongst other “rafts,” a reliance on Right View, the Right View that is non-dual, the Right View that is beyond all extremes and perverted views—such as thinking that things exist. With Right View, we see that they only “exist” not-permanently nor not not-permanently, but in the Middle Way, in a dependent way free of unchangeable permanent characteristics. Sounds simple, but it is not! It takes time for most people to grapple with this change in perception, decades, not days or weeks or even years.

In the conclusion to the *Heart Sutra*, there is an assertion that there is a magical mantra that, if recited diligently, will lead us to enlightenment. Avalokiteshvara tells Shariputra that the mantra with which the sutra ends is the greatest possible mantra one can recite if one wants to become enlightened. Phrases like great transcendent, great bright, utmost mantra, supreme mantra, incomparable mantra, most illuminating, highest mantra, mantra beyond compare, and mantra with “the power to put an end to all kinds of suffering,” are quite a sales pitch for its magical ability. Do you believe in magic? Many Buddhists do.

The mantra, which is usually recited three times, is Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha! A loose translation is “Gone, gone, everyone gone all the way beyond suffering to the other shore (enlightenment), hallelujah!”

The authors of this commentary do not believe in magic. It is inconsistent with their understanding of Right View; it is inconsistent with their understanding of Nagarjuna’s proof of emptiness, which is foundational to Buddhist philosophy; it is inconsistent with their belief in rationality being an essential underpinning to the teaching of the Buddha himself; it falsely assumes cause-and-effect, and it is inconsistent with the moral philosophy that arises from emptiness!

This is not to say that mantras are useless. They can be calming in the face of a tumultuous everyday world, they can set wholesome intentions, can keep one’s practice on the rails and offer a focus for meditation, to offer just a few examples of their benefits. They can be powerful, just not magical. Again that’s to Andy and Carl, who nonetheless recognize that asserting there is no magic dualistically means there is magic. Or something like that, as Roshi Philip Whalen once explained to Carl.

Again, many Buddhists and Buddhist sects do assert that phenomena can arise from magical rites and rituals, and mantras, even if that seems to contradict some key teachings. Magic/no magic; your choice, it seems.

Section Three: Annotated Text

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Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva (PW)

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva (SZ)

Avalokiteshvara (NH)

Avalokiteshvara is the archetype of compassion; the name means one who hears and responds to the cries of the world. Bodhisattva is a title given to someone in Buddhist mythology who has reached liberation, but rather than going off to live in nirvana, in the “world of enlightenment,” has decided to stay here with us in samsara, this “world of suffering.” Although this is taken literally by most Buddhists, it best serves us when considered a metaphor since emptiness teaches us that there is no nirvana nor samsara as independent entities. Nirvana and samsara are better thought of as states of being or perception, rather than separate worlds to be inhabited. This focus on the true nature of emptiness is the major focus of the Heart Sutra. In shorthand, being a Bodhisattva is a bit like having one foot in each state of being, and hopping back and forth as needed.

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Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva, . . .



Guanyin of the Southern Sea, Chinese, 11th/12th century, Atkins-Nelson Museum of Art, Kansas City – Note the male torso with sheer feminine clothing and the standardized pose of the bent knee indicating she is about to leap into action to relieve someone's suffering

When practicing deeply the *prajna paramita* (PW)

when deeply practicing *prajna paramita* (SZ)

while practicing deeply with
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore (NH)

Prajna paramita means “the perfection (*paramita*) of wisdom (*prajna*)” and refers to a finely-honed, transcendental way of seeing the empty nature of reality.

. . . was “practicing deeply the prajna paramita.” In other words, she was deeply meditating on emptiness . . .

Emptiness is the term in Buddhist philosophy for the ultimate states of all phenomena, meaning “empty of permanence.” Phenomena that are empty of permanence are by definition, without a static identity or autonomous existence. They lack a permanent definition, meaning, value, form, or function.

Again, all phenomena—all people, places, things, events, processes, states, etc.—lack permanence, lack any inherent qualities, discernible self-sufficient nature, function, definition, form, or meaning. It is especially important to understand that “emptiness” is an adjective, not a noun; it is a designation, not a thing. It is not something permanent that underlies the universe, but rather, and simply, “ultimately” how things really are, which means dependently arisen (arising relative to and dependent on other things) and ever changing.

Take chocolate, for example. For most of us, a piece of chocolate holds great appeal. We have developed an affinity and if it’s bitter chocolate, we may even believe it has health benefits as well as being delicious. But if we eat too much chocolate, we feel bloated and sick and our affinity quickly turns into an aversion. This illustrates that chocolate is neither inherently appealing nor inherently distasteful. It lacks an independent, autonomous desirable or undesirable self-nature and requires other conditions to be present for it to have any qualities at all (e.g., a certain quantity, freshness, a complex flavor profile, appealing color, etc.). It is empty. Were it not empty, it would have an eternal always-the-same meaning and value (and desirability), and we could never change from liking it to disliking it. To use another example, one of the authors loves blueberries and the other does not. As in the chocolate example, this is only possible because blueberries are empty, meaning they lack an inherent likability or undesirability, or for that matter any other permanent, autonomous meaning and definition.

In English, the word “empty” may seem negative and pessimistic as the starting point for a philosophy of life, but in the way it is used here it is the foundation for a life of infinite possibilities. Only because there is emptiness, because things are not permanent, only because things don’t have an intrinsic existence, are we able to distinguish between moral and immoral actions, and are able to make distinctions between beneficial and harmful actions. In fact, it is from emptiness, as we said, that morality arises.

Once we realize what emptiness is, what Avalokiteshvara was meditating on, life becomes lighter, happier, and as a consequence, healthier. It gives us a navigational tool for seeing ourselves, our families, and the everyday world in a new, clear, comfortable, satisfactory light. It is an understanding that allows us to be fully present and engaged—spiritually, cognitively, morally, ethically, and emotionally—in a wholehearted way, with who we are and what we are doing.

It is definitely not “empty” in the everyday sense of being meaningless, or futile, or in the sense of there being nothing there. It is the exact opposite. Emptiness is a worldview that allows us to be

connected and fully engaged with ourselves and others. It is an optimistic view that leads us to infinite possibilities.

Just bear in mind that emptiness is a completely positive and emphatically mindful and engaged, peaceful way of seeing ourselves and our world. That's why Avalokiteshvara was practicing deeply with it, and why we should also practice with it. It is, as she discovered, not only a way of realizing the ultimate nature of phenomena, *but also the path to freedom through the realization of the five aggregates*.

Finally, realizing the emptiness of all events is a state where all mental constructions dividing reality into discrete entities are absent, and there is a seeing of everything, non-dualistically, "as it really is." But this state, by definition, allows for no more statements.

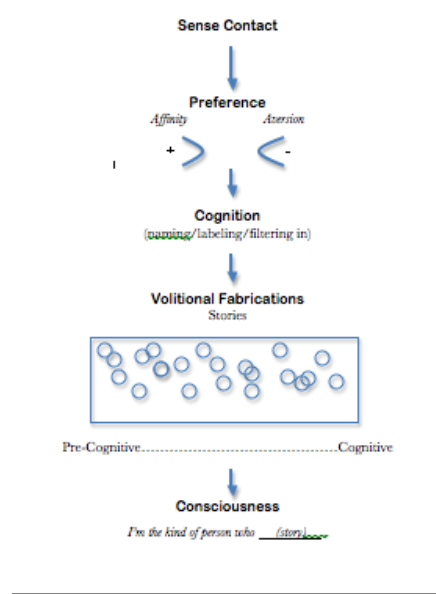
Perceived that all five skandhas in their own being are empty
And was saved from all suffering. (PW)

clearly saw that all five aggregates are empty and thus relieved all suffering (SZ)

suddenly discovered that
all of the five Skandhas are equally empty,
and with this realization
he overcame all Ill-being (NH)

. . . when she realized that each of the five aggregates (skandhas) are empty and also that the combination of the five together are empty.

The Five Aggregates: There is a vast commentarial literature explaining the five aggregates, here we are just present the basic model, how it works, how we can use it to relive our anxiety and stress, and how we can use it to live more peacefully in the face of our unwholesome karma.



The aggregates are an ancient, five step model for how we create our stories and our understanding of our Self and the world. Here's how it works: when we make (1) a sense contact, our primitive reptilian brain assigns it either (2) an affinity or an aversion, which we cling to. This happens instantaneously, and is pre-cognitive. The moment we hear a lion roar or a guard dog bark aggressively, we assign an aversion to the sound and what we believe the sense contact was. If the contact and its attendant feeling are strong enough, we (3) cognize it, meaning we set our mind to writing a story about it so we will know what to do with our perception and its attendant affect. (4) The stories are fabricated from memory fragments assembled because they somehow seem close to what's happening, and because they make sense in terms of our previous understandings and beliefs. Finally, (5) the story goes to our conscious mind and we identify with the story and appropriate it as us or ours. It looks like this: "I am the kind of person (identification) who likes their (appropriation) chocolate very dark and bitter." So the story is written without our knowledge from fragments of older stories, each similarly written from fragments of older stories. It's a house of cards; it certainly has nothing to do with what is happening in the present moment. But we believe it, we protect and defend it as true and right, which makes anyone who disagrees with us foolish and wrong. Worse, we act on it with certainty, which leads to everything from unnecessary minor disagreements with our family members to open hostility with others, whether in the form of political arguments or at its worst, war and genocide.

Once she realized this, that the five were empty, all her suffering (dukkha) just dropped away. Realizing that each of the aggregates and all of them together are empty led Avalokiteshvara to realize that there was No-Self/ Non-Self. Why? Because there was nothing to attach to (no components of a Self and no set of things that added together would make a Self), either internal, external, or purely imaginary. And when we stop attaching to our stories, stop believing that things exist in the way the mind is reifying them, stop believing that there is an independent Self, we are

freed from the unsatisfactoriness we have concocted to explain how all phenomena happen and in happening cause us to suffer.

To end her suffering, Avalokiteshvara had to realize that it was believing the stories about herself that her mind created in the aggregates, all of which give us the illusion that we are here, in the exact, permanent way our minds presents us to us, was what led to one's suffering. Ending one's suffering, reaching liberation, means profoundly realizing No-Self and being able to generalize it to Non-Self (i.e., no Selves exist anywhere). It means seeing in meditation that the illusory Self is empty, meaning just an illusion. It means ending our clinging to that Self presented to us by our minds.

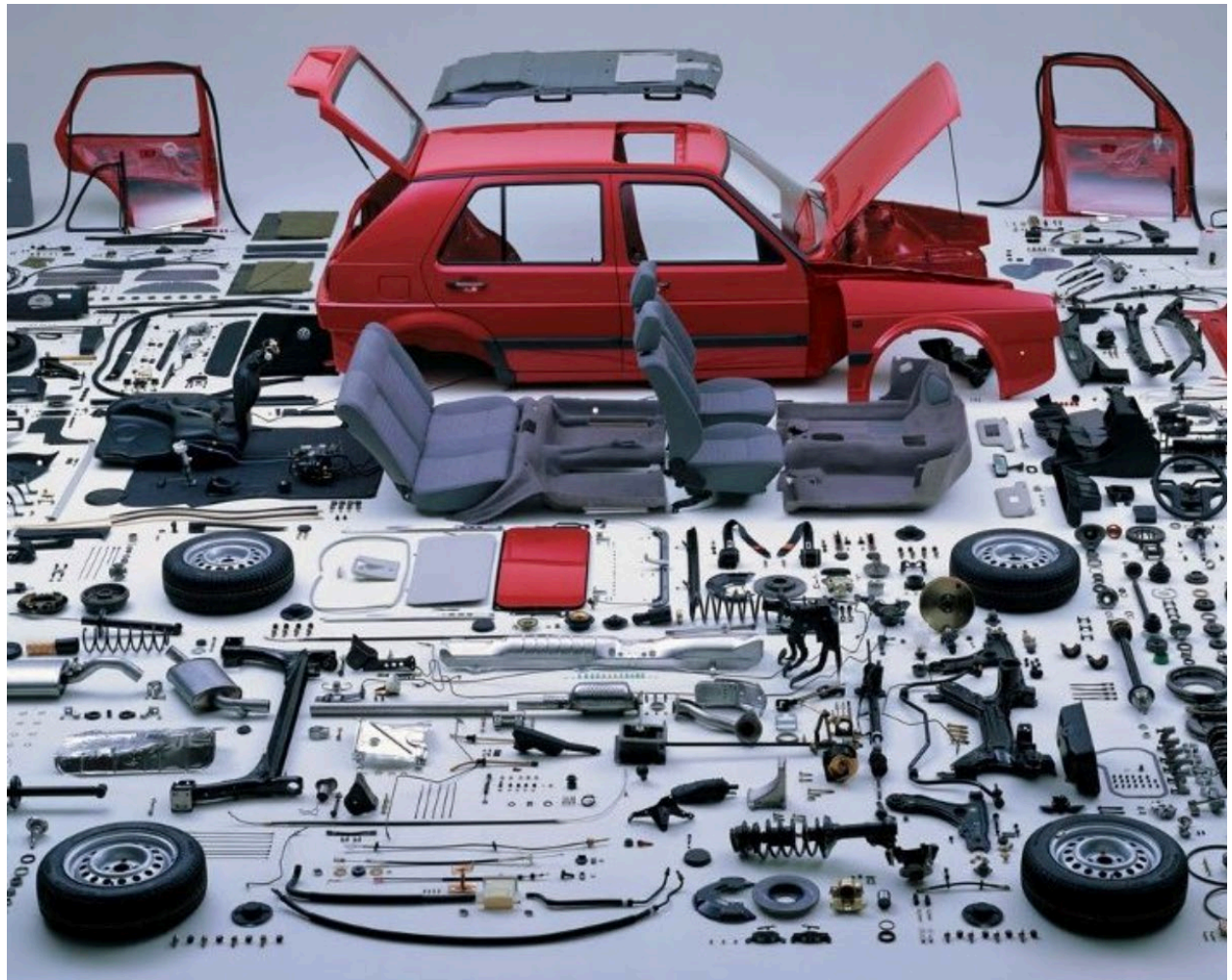
We can do this too. We can learn not to believe that our sense contacts exist in the way we are perceiving them. We can learn not to believe or even assign an affinity or an aversion to every sense contact. We can realize, as Avalokiteshvara did, that these sense contact phenomena, and the next aggregate, the assignment of significant import to these sense contacts are not so significant that we must fabricate a narrative (a story, a fiction) instructing us what to do about each sense contact and its falsely assigned affect. That's the first three aggregates, a la Avalokiteshvara. Next, and this is still pre-cognitive, she, like all of us, would go into her karmic storehouse (the alaya storehouse), create some narratives from fragments of older stories, and then send each story to consciousness, to conscious awareness—thereby becoming the kind of person who loves dark chocolate but hates salted milk chocolate coated peanuts.

Learning first that each of these five aggregates is empty and learning to understand how these five aggregates progress from sense contact to consciousness is the beginning of this highway to liberation. The more we practice with it, the more peaceful we become.

No-Self: The Sanskrit word for No Self (atman) originally meant “not having a soul.” A better translation would be Not-Self. It meant that there was no *permanent* part of us, no *permanent* Self in our mind-body, or for the matter in anything, that moves magically through time and space. Originally this was about moving from one life to the next. Today we more commonly translate “atman” to mean “No Self.”

If the meaning of “No Self” were that there is literally no Self whatsoever, no personal identity and no moral agency, then the only logical conclusion would be that Buddhism is nonsense. But that's not the case. It simply means that there is no *permanent* Self to be found in us. No magical being (Self) that is *permanent and separate* from our mind-body.

If there were a Self, the harder we look for our Self the more likely we would be to find it. But that's not the case—the harder we look (either in meditation or with intellectual scrutiny), the less there seems to be a Self.



No car, no Self, no carness found when we deconstruct - be it a vehicle or our mind-body. Take us apart and lay us out on the lawn, and nowhere will we find a Self. The original metaphor in the oldest scriptures used a chariot, not a car - we've updated it.

Put another way, the Self, which is the source of all our suffering, is an imaginary being that falsely appears, from moment to moment, to be real, independent and autonomous from its side. This imagined Self takes the shape of a time traveler with an inherent essence that moves through time and space as an entity somehow fantasized as being within the mind, or body, or both, or neither, but that is never discoverable there upon examination. And this false conceit of a nonexistent Self as existent in the way we are perceiving it, that is the source of our suffering, all our suffering, for there is no such being.

**“O Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness;
Emptiness does not differ from form.
That which is form is emptiness;
That which is emptiness, form. (PW)**

Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself form. (SZ)

“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. (NH)

Shariputra is next being told that form, form here meaning the body, but extends to include all phenomena, is empty, without an independent, permanent self-essence. But further Shariputra is being told that emptiness itself is empty. So form is empty and emptiness is form—no difference. We infer emptiness from form, and form from emptiness. Put another way, as entities (forms) are ultimately unfindable, this absence that is emptiness cannot be non-empty and findable. This recognition uncovers the ultimate truth that emptiness is empty, and arises in companionship with the realization that form too is emptiness. This is one of the more difficult ideas for novices, and even for serious practitioners, so be patient as you consider it and its implications.

The same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses, consciousness. (PW)

Sensations, perceptions, formations and consciousness are also like this. (SZ)

The same is true of Feelings,
Perceptions, Mental Formations,
and Consciousness. (NH)

To summarize, Avalokiteshvara is restating her understanding, realized in meditation, that if the first aggregate, which we translate as “sense contact,” is empty, the other four aggregates—feeling, cognition, volitional formations, and consciousness are also empty. Avalokiteshvara is emphasizing, that everything, especially the five aggregates are emptiness and emptiness is everything.

O Shariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness;
They do not appear or disappear,
Are not tainted nor pure,
Do not increase or decrease. (PW)

Shariputra, all dharmas are marked by emptiness; they neither arise nor cease, are neither defiled nor pure, neither increase nor decrease. (SZ)

“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 Purity,
no Increasing no Decreasing. (NH)

“Listen up, Dude,” Avalokiteshvara seems to be saying, “understanding that everything is empty leads us to further understandings, all of which, separately and together, are rafts to end suffering.” Here the raft is, again, the duality/non-dual raft: the true nature of emptiness is characterized by no-birth and not no-birth, no-being and not no-being; no defilement and no not-defiled (pure); and no increasing and not no-increasing (decreasing).

This is a universal message: since ultimate reality is empty/non-dual, there can only be dependent origination – there is no separateness of phenomena in ultimate reality, and thus concepts like “Self,” “this thing,” “that thing,” “causation,” “if this, then necessarily that” can have no meaning outside the purely shortcut, descriptive nature of dependent arising. If all things are empty of inherent characteristics, then in fact there are no independently-existing (i.e., permanent) “things” at all, which means that there are only the impermanent conditions leading to the conventional existence of the empty Self.

Then Avalokiteshvara goes on to explain that emptiness is everything and everywhere, and can only be characterized by what it is not rather than what it is. This is, as stated above, because emptiness is not a thing or place, it is an inferred characteristic, or, more properly, lack of any characteristics. Emptiness is an adjective, not a noun. So what is emptiness *not*?

Emptiness is when there is not origination (no beginning, no birth), and not any extinction (no ending, no death); no permanence nor eternalism and no non-existence; it is when nothing is tainted, nor defiled and nothing is pure (has any independent existence at all) from its own side. Since all phenomena can be seen as not having any of these qualities in reality (origination, permanence, pureness), all is empty.

There are no such thing as beginnings or endings, or for that matter, no such qualitative valuation characterizing phenomena as defiled or pure, because these are merely qualities created by our minds, not qualities inherent in phenomena, in people, places, things, etc. And in emptiness, everything is pacific, there is neither increasing nor decreasing. Our ultimate nature is completely and utterly still and empty. Nothing is arising and ceasing, appearing or disappearing, or for the same reason, nothing is tainted or pure—they are just more categories created by mind. Emptiness has none of these characteristics, which are not inherently there but are only nominal understandings, merely words.

Avalokiteshvara now further explains emptiness to Shariputra by further deconstructing the five aggregates and then the 18 sense realms, and asserting that all (the five and the 18) are empty.

As with all things, because they are empty, Avalokiteshvara says that the five aggregates can be understood as not separate and independent. Again, we are told that each of the aggregates is empty of an independent existence – no necessary qualities - meaning that there is no origination of them and no extinction of them; no permanence to them and no non-existence to them; that they are neither defiled or pure; and, they are neither increasing nor decreasing.

Tightening her argument, Avalokiteshvara immediately moves to asserting that the 18 realms in the first aggregates are empty. The 18 result from there being 3 realms for each of our six senses: a physical organ (eyes, for example), a contact with which that organ makes contact (visible stuff) and an eye consciousness (awareness of seeing). This is a further breakdown of the first aggregates which was explained in the opening of the sutra. Again, by implication and deduction, that makes all five of the aggregates empty and establishes that there is No Self. Why? Because the model or schema for defining our psychophysical Self is the Five Aggregates. We know this for sure because if we observe how we perceive phenomena we will see that this is the way we construct the Self. We can also perceive the aggregates arising during deep meditation, like Avalokiteshvara was practicing at the beginning of the sutra.

Here's how the 18 realms look in a chart:

Sense Organ:	Eyes	Ears	Nose	Tongue	Body	Mind
Sense Object:	Visibles	Sounds	Odors	Tastes	Tactile Sensations	Thoughts
Consciousnesses:	Eye Consciousness	Ear Consciousness	Nose Consciousness	Tongue Consciousness	Tactile Consciousness	Mind Consciousness

Avalokiteshvara is emphasizing that every one of these 18 sense realms is empty. Every one of these 18 lacks permanence, lacks objective, independent existence “from its own side.” For example, our eyes lack permanence; the way they respond to stimuli lacks definition, meaning, value, and function.

**Therefore in emptiness, no form,
 No feelings, no perceptions, no impulses, no consciousness;
 No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind;
 No color, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind;
 No realm of eyes until no realm of mind-consciousness (PW)**

Therefore, given emptiness, there is no form, no sensation, no perception, no formation, no consciousness; no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no sight, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind; no realm of sight...no realm of mind consciousness. (SZ)

**“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. (NH)**

Understanding the concept of No Self can be profoundly difficult for beginner and novice practitioners, and difficult too even for those with decades old practices. For a fuller exposition and alternative ways to attack the image of No-Self, see *deepdharma.org*.

The Search for Self

Only through a thorough search for Self, like Avalokiteshvara's in this sutra, can we refute Self and ultimately end our suffering and the suffering of all sentient beings.

All our afflictions—all of our distress and hardships, all of our uneasiness and suffering, all of our pain and trouble—arise from ignorance. Avalokiteshvara sees ignorance as being a misunderstanding of the nature of the Self: an inability to see our self as it really is—empty—and instead to reify it. Dealing with this misunderstanding, head-on, therefore, is our most important spiritual practice.

We cannot realize emptiness without first knowing what it is that things are empty of; emptiness isn't some vague nothingness. And that is what Avalokiteshvara is explaining to Sariputra. We need to recognize all the components of and the Self as empty.

In order to catch a thief we have to know who the person is and what they look like. The greatest thief of all is our mistaken sense of Self—the conception that not only ourselves but all its components and other phenomena as well are truly existent. We believe that things really exist the way they appear to our senses, as objectively established, as existing from their own side. Such nonsense since all our senses and even the 18 realms are empty. This, then, is what we have to know in order to catch this great thief, our Self, who steals all our happiness and peace of mind.

When we start observing how the false self—the self we have habitually assumed to exist in persons and objects—manifests, we soon discover that it does not exist at all. It disappears. If the “I” truly did exist, the more we searched for it the more concrete it should become. But it doesn't become more concrete, it becomes less and less existent and concrete.

**No ignorance and also no extinction of it until no old-age-and-death
And also no extinction of it;
No suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path;**

No cognition, also no attainment. (PW)

There is neither ignorance nor extinction of ignorance...neither old age and death, nor extinction old age and death; no suffering, no cause, no cessation, no path; no knowledge and no attainment. (SZ)

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. (NH)

Next Avalokiteshvara cryptically explains to Shariputra another model for creating Self, but this one also explains how we create our suffering, the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising. Below we unpack a version of a 12-Links description from the renowned 20th century Thai monk, Buddhadasa.

The Twelve Links delineate how our Self and our suffering arise, beginning with unformed ignorance and ending with death. This is a comprehensive model for how phenomena arise— in dependence on other things, not separately or independently as they seem to appear to our ignorance mind. In the scriptural literature there are several different 12 point models, here we use the one, in two different formats, that fits with the list of negated phenomena in the Heart Sutra.

We start with a short description, to give the reader a taste for the twelve links.

Short Version: Our (1) **ignorance** of how things are (empty) leads us to concoct (2) **stories**. These stories tell us how to act, speak, and think, and leave imprints (karmic dispositions) on our (3) **consciousness**. Our consciousness makes us aware of our (4) **mind-body**. As the mind-body arises as an ignorant, but active being, we become aware that we are being driven by (5) **sense contacts**. These are accompanied by the addition of (6) **feeling tones** (affinities and aversions). These feelings lead us to (7) **craving** for more, either of those contacts we have an affinity for, or to rid ourselves of more of those we are aversive toward. Craving leads us to (8) **clinging**, but not to the things we are craving, rather to our Self, our stories about what we want or want to be rid of. Our attachment to Self's stories leads us to wanting to continue our (9) **existence**, wanting us to continue becoming our Self through continuing with the stream of stories that delude us into thinking there is a Self. This continuation is, metaphorically speaking, our next (10) **rebirth**. With rebirth as the next condition, (11 & 12) **aging and death** follow and then the whole cycle starts again.

The Twelve Links, Annotated from a Talk by Ajahn Buddhadasa

The Twelve Links describes conscious experience. Our **ignorance** of how things really are conditions us to the basic act of the mind which is to cognize things with which we have sense contact by concocting stories about them. These stories allow us to develop **consciousness**.

This is a description from the early Pali canon which explains how we perceive and experience our Self and our world. It starts by asserting the everything begins from our ignorance, from our mistaken understanding that things are real and autonomous in the way we are perceiving them. Our ignorance, then, leads us to concoct stories about what is and how to respond to it, and our mind sends these stories to our consciousness where we become conscious of them.

Consciousness makes it possible for there to be **mind-body** (a sentient being). Once mind-body arises as an ignorant active structure, **sense organs** arise in the person and become active. Active sense organs make it possible for there to be **contact** with external objects (sights, smells, sounds, etc), leaving a meaningful impression on the mind, an experience that is both physical and of which we are conscious. Without contact, nothing would exist for sentient beings, not even the world.

Once we become conscious we become aware of our mind-body, of ourselves as thinking beings. With that understanding comes the arising in our minds of us having sense organs, and that those sense organs are contacting sense objects, as listed in the Eighteen Realms in the Sutra.

Because there has been contact, a **feeling** arises about the experience of the contact. Because feelings are dependent upon contact, which arises from senses which exist because there is mind-body—all of which is just a fabrication, a concoction, a story that arose from ignorance, the feeling is false and foolish.

Once there is contact, our mind divides the contact into two categories: affinities and aversions. Every contact is assigned with a positive or a negative affective value. These arise from our ignorance.

Ignorant feelings lead to foolish desires for more of what we like and less of what we dislike. This **craving**—deeply desiring and wanting—leads to clinging and attaching. The stronger the feeling and craving, the greater the clinging and attachment.

These ignorant feelings lead to cravings for more of what we have an affinity for, and to wanting less of those phenomena we have assigned an aversion to. These affinities and aversion are the lens through which we concoct our stories, and it is to our stories about what we like, for example, that we attach, not to the object we find attractive. That means we are clinging to Self. And clinging to Self is the source of our suffering.

Clinging is the attachment to self. Which is why there is dukkha.

If there were no clinging, there would be no suffering. But with clinging, everything and anything is grasped as me and mine, self and of-self. This thing we are grasping has arisen because ignorant mind clings to something that arose through conditions a moment ago and is now gone.

Once attachment occurs, **existence (becoming)** arises. Meaning once there is clinging there is a basis for something, whatever is clung to now exists as **I**, somehow, somewhere. So clinging causes something to arise in the realm of our existence. Thus there is both a being and an environment for that being created, solidifying both a false inner world and outer world.

Attachment to our stories of Self and what Self want leads to a perception that we want to continue becoming in this existence

With existence there is **(re)birth**. Even though it was previously just clinging to a concept, the Self has grown and developed and a new even more self-centered **I** has been born. **(Re)birth** happens every time there is craving or desire, every time there is a thought. For every time there is a thought, the sense of **I-me-my-mine** grows and develops.

(Re)birth, and here we mean rebirth from moment to moment (not life to life) then arises from our desire for existence.

So dukkha is the result of birth, ego is born from ignorant craving. We are created in dukkha (born out of craving), from dukkha and by dukkha.

Rebirth, of course, is the condition that leads us to aging and death.

With birth as a condition, **aging and death arise**. Because we don't realize this, we stay ignorant and keep being born. Further, the natural process of arising, running its course, and ceasing, the Self appropriates and identifies with: my birth, my aging, my death. *So we have transformed a natural process into a static personal problem.*

Summarily: all forms of suffering come from our clinging to **I** and mine; and every rebirth of self is a birth of suffering.

**The bodhisattvas depend on prajna paramita
And their minds are no hindrance.
Without any hindrance no fears exist;
Far apart from every perverted view they dwell in Nirvana. (PW)**

**With nothing to attain, a bodhisattva relies on prajna paramita, and thus the mind is no hindrance.
Without hindrance, there is no fear. Far beyond all inverted views, one realizes nirvana. (SZ)**

**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. (NH)

Although it seems counterintuitive, the mind is the problem, as we learn here, *not* the solution. After all, it is the mind that assigns affinities and aversions to phenomena, causing us to become greedy, angry, and deluded. To rephrase Descartes' famous dictum more accurately: "(not) I think, therefore (not) I suffer." That is a critical part of understanding the opening lines of the Sutra, which is particularly manifest with respect to the second of the Five Aggregates—feeling, meaning adding a false feeling tone to all our sense contacts. This being so, then where do we turn to become liberated? Bodhisattvas, we learn here (again harking back to the opening lines of the Sutra), depend on prajna paramita - contemplation leading (we hope) to an immediate experience of emptiness—the wisdom that is beyond mind, beyond language, beyond conceptualization, beyond duality. That's the wisdom that eliminates all hindrances, all obstacles in the mind, and critically, results in all fear and wrong views becoming recognizably nonexistent.

Far apart from every perverted view they dwell in Nirvana. (PW)

Far beyond all inverted views, one realizes nirvana. (SZ)

because there
are no more obstacles in their mind...
[Bodhisattvas]
destroy all wrong perceptions
and realize Perfect Nirvana. (NH)

With Right View, the view that is beyond views, there is no attainment, and nothing to be attained, so there are no hindrances or obstacles to being utterly peaceful, to being in the world without fear, meaning without fear of non-attainment. Yes, the *Heart Sutra* is telling us, we can live without fear! And we do it with, amongst other "rafts," a reliance on Right View, the Right View that is non-dual, the Right View that is beyond all extremes and perverted views—such as thinking that things exist. With Right View, we see that they only "exist" not-permanently nor not not-permanently, but in the Middle Way, in a dependent way free of unchangeable permanent characteristics. Sounds simple, but it is not! It takes time for most people to grapple with this change in perception, decades, not days or weeks or even years.

In the three worlds all Buddhas depend on prajna paramita
And attain unsurpassed complete perfect Enlightenment. (PW)

All buddhas of past, present and future rely on prajna paramita and thereby attain unsurpassed complete perfect enlightenment. (SZ)

“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. (NH)

In the conclusion to the *Heart Sutra*, there is an assertion that there is a magical mantra that, if recited diligently, will lead us to enlightenment. Avalokiteshvara tells Shariputra that the mantra with which the sutra ends is the greatest possible mantra one can recite if one wants to become enlightened. Phrases like great transcendent, great bright, utmost mantra, supreme mantra, incomparable mantra, most illuminating, highest mantra, mantra beyond compare, and mantra with “the power to put an end to all kinds of suffering,” are quite a sales pitch for its magical ability. Do you believe in magic? Many Buddhists do.

The mantra, which is usually recited three times, is Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha! A loose translation is “Gone, gone, everyone gone all the way beyond suffering to the other shore (enlightenment), hallelujah!”

Therefore know the prajna paramita
Is the great transcendent mantra,
Is the great bright mantra,
Is the utmost mantra,
Is the supreme mantra,
Which is able to relieve all suffering
And is true, not false.
So proclaim, the prajna paramita mantra,
Proclaim the mantra that says:
Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate! Bodhi! Svaha!” (PW)

Therefore know the prajna paramita as the great miraculous mantra, the great bright mantra, the supreme mantra, the incomparable mantra, which removes all suffering and is true, not false. Therefore we proclaim the prajna paramita mantra, the mantra that says: gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha. (SZ)

“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!”

The authors of this commentary do not believe in magic. It is inconsistent with their understanding of Right View; it is inconsistent with their understanding of Nagarjuna’s proof of emptiness, which is foundational to Buddhist philosophy; it is inconsistent with their belief in rationality being an essential underpinning to the teaching of the Buddha himself; it falsely assumes cause-and-effect, and it is inconsistent with the moral philosophy that arises from emptiness!

This is not to say that mantras are useless. They can be calming in the face of a tumultuous everyday world, they can set wholesome intentions, can keep one’s practice on the rails and offer a focus for meditation, to offer just a few examples of their benefits. They can be powerful, just not magical. Again that’s to Andy and Carl, who nonetheless recognize that asserting there is no magic dualistically means there is magic. Or something like that, as Roshi Philip Whalen once explained to Carl.

Again, many Buddhists and Buddhist sects do assert that phenomena can arise from magical rites and rituals, and mantras, even if that seems to contradict some key teachings. Magic/no magic; your choice, it seems.