

# The Heart Sutra

Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe





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*First edition*

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# Preface



*The Vajrayana Booklets* comprise the readings for the third year of The Autumn Buddhist Philosophy Course. They concern another of the main traditions of Buddhism, the Vajrayana tradition. The Vajrayana is the third of our three main Buddhist traditions after the Hinayana (Theravada) and Mahayana. Vajrayana is also known as Tantric Buddhism because it emphasises the use of sacred texts and practices to transform ordinary experience into profound spiritual understanding.

There are three booklets in The Vajrayana Booklets series – *The Heart*

*Sutra, Seven Point Mind Training* and *Buddhahood and a Vajrayana Path*. Whilst *The Heart Sutra* and *Seven Point Mind Training* are considered practices in Mahayana, they are also foundational practices within Vajrayana.

These booklets are based on the recorded teachings of Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe.

Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe is one of the most highly qualified Tibetan Buddhist Sakya lamas in Australia. He is highly respected in Australia and internationally for his profound knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism, the clarity and inspirational qualities of his teachings, and his understanding of the western mind.

Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe has been a monk since 1971. At the age of nine, he entered the Sakya Monastery in Bir, India, and remained there for 10 years. When Khenpo was 19, the principal of Sakya College in Dehradun, His Eminence Khenchen Appey Rinpoche, asked the Sakya Monastery to send senior monks to join the Sakya College. Sakya College is one of the most famous Tibetan philosophical institutes in India. It was established by His Holiness the 41st Sakya Trizin and His Eminence Khenchen Appey Rinpoche.

Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe was chosen to join the Sakya College. He studied there for just over 10 years, from 1979 to 1990. In his sixth year he was nominated as the Discipline Master. This was a challenging role, as some of the monks, including his peers, were older than him. In Khenpo's seventh year he was appointed a Teacher's Assistant, and in the eighth year he studied for the degree of Kacho Pa – the equivalent of a Bachelor of Arts, requiring intensive study. In Khenpo's ninth and tenth years he studied for the degree of Loppon, equivalent to a PhD degree. At the same time, he taught and conducted examinations at the college.

In 1994 His Holiness the 41st Sakya Trizin appointed Khenpo as Resident Teacher at Sakya Tharpa Ling, a Buddhist centre in Sydney, following the passing of the 14th Gyalsay Tulku Rinpoche. In 2002, His Holiness bestowed on him the title of 'khenpo', or abbot, in recognition of his teaching ability. The bestowal of the term 'khenpo' recognises something considered rare and precious. His Holiness the 41st Sakya Trizin recognised Khenpo's special



qualities and deep understanding of Buddhist philosophies, both in sutra and tantra, and held an Enthronement Ceremony in the Bir Monastery Northern India, promoting Khenpo from the term Loppon to Khenpo in March 2002.

The term 'khenpo' has at least three meanings in Tibetan Buddhism: a scholar who has completed an extensive course of study in sutra and tantra, a senior lama who can give ordinations, and the head of a monastery. The khenpos have been the main channels for keeping the purity of Buddha's teachings alive from generation to generation within the Tibetan monastic tradition.

Since November 2015 Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe has lived and taught at Kamalashila Tibetan Buddhist Centre near Tilba on the south coast of New South Wales, although he travels to many countries to spread the Dharma.

From 2017 to 2019, Khenpo taught the first component of the Seven Year Complete Path for senior students which was coordinated by the International Buddhist Academy in Kathmandu under the strict guidance of, and within the program developed by, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin.

In 2019, Khenpo began to develop The Autumn Buddhist Philosophy Course, a three-year program teaching the main concepts and practices of the three main traditions of Buddhism – Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana. The inaugural program began in 2022.

There are many to thank for *The Vajrayana Booklets* but first and foremost we would like to thank Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe for his precious teachings which he has given so generously and diligently to his students over so many years. They have greatly helped his students to understand and to apply the Dharma in their lives to such good effect. These booklets were prepared over five years and with many hours of work by transcribers and editors. The best gift of appreciation we can give our teacher in return is to apply these methods in diligent practice of the Dharma.

*May the precious Dharma continue down through the ages  
to guide countless beings on the Path.*

*Carole Kayrooz Emeritus Professor and Lael Morrissey,  
November 2023*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*The Vajrayana Booklets* is one of a series based on teachings by Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe. We have many to thank for their contributions to the series.

*The Heart Sutra* was transcribed by Lael Morrissey and edited by Lael Morrissey, Gerlese Akerlind, Robert Garran and Carole Kayrooz.

Lael Morrissey and Ulladulla Printing and Signage prepared the layout and design.

# The Heart Sutra

To the inconceivable, inexpressible Prajnaparamita, unborn, unceasing, with nature like space, which is experienced by self-awareness, discerning pristine cognition: to the Mother of the Victorious Ones of the Three Times, I pay homage.

Thus I have heard, at one time, the Blessed One was abiding at Vulture's Peak in Rajagriha, together with a great assembly of bhikshus and a great assembly of bodhisattvas.

At that time, the Blessed One was absorbed in the samadhi called 'Profound Illumination'.

Also at that time, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva, Arya Avalokiteshvara, was reviewing the profound characteristics of the Prajnaparamita and realised the natural emptiness of the five aggregates.

Then through the blessing of the Buddha, the elder Shariputra asked Arya Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva, 'How should one of noble lineage train, who wishes to practise the profound perfection of wisdom?'

The Arya Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva, replied to the elder Shariputra, 'Shariputra, those of noble lineage who wish to practise the profound perfection of wisdom should correctly view the five aggregates as empty of inherent existence.

'Form is empty, emptiness is also form, emptiness is not other than form, form is not other than emptiness. In the same way feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness are empty.

'Noble Shariputra, all dharmas are empty and have no characteristics. They are unborn and unceasing, undefiled and unpurified, neither decreasing nor

increasing. Therefore, Shariputra, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no mental formations, no consciousness, no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind, no form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no dharma.

‘Consequently, there is no eye element and so forth, up to no mind element, nor mind consciousness element. There is no ignorance, no elimination of ignorance up to no old age and death nor the elimination of old age and death.

‘In the same way, there is no suffering, no cause of suffering, no cessation, no path, no primordial wisdom, no attainment and no non-attainment. Therefore, Shariputra, since bodhisattvas have no attainment, they depend on and abide in the perfection of wisdom, the Prajnaparamita.

‘Since their minds have no obscurations, they have no fear. They have gone beyond all deception and have attained the complete state of nirvana.

‘All the Buddhas of the three times have fully realised the perfect, complete and unsurpassed state of enlightenment by relying on this perfection of wisdom.

‘Therefore, this is the mantra of the perfection of wisdom, the mantra of great knowledge, the unsurpassed mantra, the unequalled mantra, the mantra which pacifies all suffering. It is not false, so it should be known as the truth.

‘The mantra of Perfection of Wisdom, the Prajnaparamita is proclaimed:

TADYATHA OM GATE GATE PARA GATE PARA SAMGATE BODHI  
SVAHA

‘Shariputra, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva, one of noble lineage should engage in the practice of the perfection of wisdom in this way’.

The Blessed One arose from the samadhi of ‘Profound Illumination’ and said to the mighty Arya Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva, ‘Well done! Well done, One of noble lineage, it is just so. The practice of perfection of wisdom should be practised just as you have explained and all the Tathagatas will rejoice’.

After the Blessed One had spoken, the elder Shariputra, the Arya Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva, along with all the assembly of humans, gods, demi-gods and gandharvas rejoiced and praised the words of the Buddha.

## Repelling Obstacles

TADYATHA OM GATE GATE PARA GATE PARA SAMGATE BODHI  
SVAHA

*Om gone, gone, perfectly gone, perfectly gone and completely gone,  
to the state of enlightenment, so should the foundation be built.*

Namo! Prostrations to the Guru, prostrations to the Buddha, prostrations to the Dharma, prostrations to the Sangha, prostrations to Prajnaparamita, the perfection of wisdom.

Through the power of the act of prostration, may the truth of our words be realised.

Just as long ago, the King of the Gods, Indra, by the power of contemplating the profound meaning of Prajnaparamita and chanting its verses, was able to repel all demonic obstacles, negativity and the like, so in the very same way, may we also through the power of contemplating the profound meaning of Prajnaparamita and chanting its verses, repel all demonic obstacles, negativity and the like. May they be annihilated. May they be pacified. May they be completely pacified.

Everything that arises interdependently is unceasing and unborn, neither non-existent, nor eternal, neither arising nor ceasing, neither with multiple meanings nor a single meaning. Thus, all concepts and duality are pacified.

To this teaching, the words of the fully enlightened Buddha, we pay homage.

On the path to attaining complete enlightenment, may all inner and outer obstacles to our attaining complete enlightenment be totally pacified.

*This was translated into English by Khenpo Migmar Tsering, with subsequent edits by Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe*

# Introduction

It is good to know the history of the *Heart Sutra*, because it helps us to realise we have the same opportunity to reach enlightenment that the Buddha had in the past. When you see that you have the same opportunity as the Buddha, the teaching becomes more meaningful and you can relate to it in day-to-day life. This is very important.

Long before the Buddha reached an enlightened state, he was an ordinary person, just like you and me. Being ordinary, he also created good and bad karma. Bad karma is not necessarily a bad thing just because it brings us suffering. Sometimes bad karma is a blessing in disguise, making one wake up. It is a blessing because doing bad things can cause regret, and this regret is a powerful engine that can quickly awaken one from samsara. Sometimes, if one carries out only good actions, it can be like riding a push-bike rather than a car, taking a longer time to arrive at the destination. If one deliberately does bad things, out of ignorance, then realising this afterwards can cause regret to arise. This regret can make us more serious about our practice, as is illustrated in the case of the Buddha.

When the Buddha was an ordinary being and he created negative karma, this led to him being born in a hell realm. Once there, he experienced unbearable pain and discomfort, and at the same time his fellow hell mates were also suffering. He then realised that even though they were all in this hell realm, he was a bit stronger than these other fellows, and he wished to help the weaker ones. So in this way, he developed his first genuine sense of compassion whilst in these hell realms. Through this compassion, he actually exhausted a lot of the negative karma that otherwise may have left him for a longer period

## INTRODUCTION

of time in the hell realm.

This is the same as being in a modern prison. If you commit a crime, you will end up in prison. Yet whilst you are in prison, if you behave positively, this will reduce the length of the sentence. Prison is a human-made law, but the hell realms are a karmic-made law. Negative karma comes from negative mind – the mind is the creator of all problems. But at the same time, positive karma comes from positive mind; the mind can be a purifier of any negativity that has been created.

In this way, Buddha exhausted his negative karma in the hell realm, then was reborn as a human, and found the Dharma. He developed this motivation: 'I want to free all beings from samsara'. He searched for what was required to achieve this wish, and found that one must be perfect within oneself. He thought, 'If I become perfect, then I can also help others to achieve this perfect state'. In this way he developed bodhicitta. From the beginning of his search until he reached enlightenment, his main practice was great compassion based on bodhicitta, nothing else. He practised compassion for three countless aeons. At the end of these countless aeons, he had mastered great compassion.

In Mahayana Buddhism, we say that compassion is extremely important in the beginning of our spiritual path, because compassion is like a seed. In the middle of our path, compassion is also very important, like the water that helps the seed to grow. And in the end, compassion is very important, because here compassion causes one to turn the Wheel of Dharma until the end of samsara. Compassion is important in the beginning, the middle and at the end.

From the Mahayana point of view, we can attain a non-abiding state, which means abiding neither in samsara, because one is not suffering, nor in nirvana, because you are still turning the Wheel of Dharma for the sake of all sentient beings. This is the greatest result one can achieve.

# The Perfection of Wisdom

After Buddha reached full Buddhahood, he turned the Wheel of Dharma innumerable times. He never rested for one second. There is no possible way to count the number of times he turned the Wheel of Dharma. However, commonly, it is said that the Buddha turned the Wheel of Dharma three times, when he taught (1) *The Four Noble Truths*, (2) *The Perfection of Wisdom* (also known as *Prajnaparamita*), and (3) teachings on what is interpretive and what is definitive. These three sutras contain all of the Hinayana and Mahayana teachings, and it is the teaching on *Perfection of Wisdom* we will be discussing in this text, using the *Heart Sutra*. There are elaborated and abbreviated versions of the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutra, and the *Heart Sutra* is the most abbreviated version. As the most abbreviated version, it gives us just a tiny flavour of the *Perfection of Wisdom* teaching. But at the same time, it contains all the essence.

The *Perfection of Wisdom* explains the essence of Buddhist wisdom, the nature of absolute truth. It doesn't matter whether you are a Theravada, Mahayana or Vajrayana practitioner, wisdom is essential. It is wisdom that enables us to practise the Buddhadharma and free ourselves from the grasping of self, because the grasping of self comes from ignorance. The only way to free our mind of ignorance and self-grasping is to attain wisdom.

The Buddhist view of wisdom makes the Buddhist path unique. No other religion shares this view of wisdom. However, it is not simple to explain the nature of wisdom in Buddhism. It is one of the most important, most profound, but most difficult of ideas to communicate and explain.

As I mentioned, there are elaborated and abbreviated versions of the



*Perfection of Wisdom* sutra on Buddhist wisdom. Generally, we speak of three versions. The most elaborate version is the *Hundred Thousand Verses*, explaining the Perfection of Wisdom sutra in its entirety. This is available in the Tibetan language and consists of over 10 very thick volumes of over 400 pages each. The next most elaborate version is of intermediate length, the *Twenty-Five Thousand Verses*. This is contained in two volumes. The next shortest version is called the *Eight Thousand Verses*. Then there is the *Heart Sutra*, which is the most abbreviated version, presenting the *Perfection of Wisdom* in just 25 verses.

Because this sutra is so profound and vast, it is not possible to fully understand it in the beginning – unless you have studied Buddhist wisdom in many of your past lifetimes, which is always a possibility. If so, by just listening and hearing the sutra, your mind can click into knowing that you know this. If you read any of the great masters' biographies, you will see how many times they received these teachings – not just once or twice, but more like a hundred times. As well as hearing this sutra so many times, they actively studied it. Then after all of that, they may have achieved just a glimpse of understanding of the meaning of this sutra. So, we must not underestimate this most profound teaching. For example, none of us can expect to be able to swim across the ocean. If we attempt this, we will sink. So, in the beginning, you just try to swim near the beach, not cross the entire ocean, for you are not ready yet.

People who find it hard to understand the meaning of this sutra can also rely on the great Indian masters' commentaries, which are called shastras. For instance, Nagarjuna wrote commentaries on the *Perfection of Wisdom* in the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*; Chandrakirti also gives a commentary on *The Perfection of Wisdom* in the *Madhyamakavatara*; and Shantideva explains this wisdom in the wisdom chapter (Chapter 9) in the *Bodhicaryavatara*. So, if one wishes to explore Buddhist wisdom and absolute truth further, it is good to study Nagarjuna's, Chandrakirti's and Shantideva's texts.

These are the Indian masters' commentaries. In addition, there are further commentaries by great Tibetan masters, such as Lama Tsongkhapa's commentary on Madhyamika Buddhist philosophy. The Sakya text *Three*

*Texts on Madhyamaka* by Sakya Chokden provides another commentary. To understand the root text of this sutra, one would need to study all of these Tibetan commentaries, which then helps one to understand the Indian commentaries, and then to understand the root of what the Buddha taught. There are many layers to the *Perfection of Wisdom* teachings. Just like mining to reach the treasure of wisdom, we need to dig through one layer after another. This is the reason why all great masters study *all* of these texts, to better understand the essence of this sutra.

## The power of Sanskrit and Tibetan languages

In ancient times, there were four main languages in India. One of them was Sanskrit, which was mostly used by scholars. The *Heart Sutra* and all the Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings were given in Sanskrit. This is why it is usually said that Buddhist philosophy is for the scholar's mind, for one needs to have a scholar's mind to understand it.

Many of these teachings were translated into Tibetan. Indian masters and Tibetan masters would jointly translate. A great Indian master would sit with a great Tibetan master, translating from Sanskrit into Tibetan. In this way, they would ensure that the translation was accurate. The only Tibetan master that could translate directly from Sanskrit into Tibetan without relying on the help of an Indian master was Sakya Pandita, a great twelfth century Tibetan master and one of the founders of the Sakya tradition. He was the only Tibetan scholar that Indian masters saw as equal to themselves in translation. Before his time, they had to jointly translate from Indian master to Tibetan master.

If you wish to understand the *entire* Dharma, you must know Sanskrit, because it is only in the language of Sanskrit that the entire Buddhadharma can be found. The second richest language to explain the Dharma is Tibetan, because there are so many translations of the original Sanskrit teachings into Tibetan. But even in Tibet, we have not managed to translate the *entire* teachings spoken in Sanskrit. Over time, many Tibetan scholars have managed to translate many teachings into Tibetan, but not everything –

meaning there are many teachings that are still only available in Sanskrit. So, only if you speak Sanskrit do you have the opportunity to experience the entirety of the teachings of the Buddha. The eyes to see the entirety of the Buddha's teachings are only Sanskrit eyes. Without Sanskrit, you cannot see everything, only parts of the whole.

And in English, it is much worse. For instance, if one looks for books on the Dharma in English, one will find hundreds of these books. But this still represents only a very small part of the total Dharma, maybe only one per cent, or even less than one per cent I would say. So, for 99 per cent of the Dharma it is as if you are blind, because you cannot read the language of Sanskrit or Tibetan, which is where all of the writings are found. Even with Tibetan, commentaries from Tibetan masters amount to over 200 volumes, but even there, teachings have not been fully translated from Sanskrit as yet. For this reason, it is important to keep Sanskrit imprinted on our minds.

Some people say that they do not have a connection with Sanskrit or the Tibetan language, that they would rather read in their own language, then it will make more sense to them. Practically, this is true. But sometimes it is good to chant in Tibetan – not in order to make one Tibetan, but because most of the Buddhadharma has been translated into Tibetan. So, if you can speak this language, you have the opportunity to read countless teachings. For this reason, chanting in Tibetan can leave an imprint in your mind for future rebirths. So, one day you may be able to speak the language, not for the sake of communication, but for the sake of reading the Dharma. Like Sanskrit, the Tibetan language contains an inconceivable wisdom. So, in order to plant this seed, sometimes it is good to chant prayers in Tibetan, even if one does not understand the meaning.

## Prajnaparamita Hridaya

In Sanskrit, the title of the Heart Sutra is *Prajnaparamita Hridaya*. *Prajna* means wisdom, *paramita* means perfection. So, *Prajnaparamita* means 'Perfection of Wisdom', which is realisation of the true nature of reality, the Absolute Truth. *Hridaya* means heart.

The *Heart Sutra* originated from India, so keeping its name in Sanskrit highlights its authenticity. Plus, when you see or hear the title, *Prajnaparamita Hridaya*, it instantly imprints Sanskrit in your mental continuum. So one day, there may be a possibility to be born in a place where you can speak Sanskrit.

## Chom Dhen Dhey

We also talk about *Bhagavati Prajnaparamita Hridaya*, where *Bhagavati* (female form) or *Bhagavan* (male form) means the Buddha in Sanskrit. But *Bhagavan* is also used to mean an Indian deity more broadly. The word *Dhey* was added by the translators in order to separate Buddha from other deities. *Dhey* means beyond the worldly god. Sometimes it is said that it is beyond samsara and nirvana. Some gods may exist in samsara or nirvana, but not the Buddha – the Buddha is beyond samsara and nirvana. So, to distinguish Buddha from other gods, we use the term, *Chom Dhen Dhey*. Then there is *Chom Dhen Dhey Ma*. *Ma* is feminine, as in mother. As we know, women are the mothers of all children. Similarly, all Buddhas – past, present and future – are born out of wisdom mind (that is, Perfection of Wisdom). Without this wisdom, there would be no past Buddhas, there would be no future Buddhas, and there would be no present Buddha. In this way, every Buddha comes from wisdom, just as children come from women. For this reason, *Chom Dhen Dhey Ma* is sometimes described as the great mother of all the Buddhas.

## Sherab

In Tibetan, *prajna* (wisdom) is translated as *sherab*. *She* means mere awareness, awareness without grasping. Like Buddha nature, every sentient being, whether human or non-human, has this awareness. But when one attains Buddhahood, this awareness becomes free from mental defilements, and this awareness is then called *dharmata* or *dharmadhatu*, which means double purity. Single purity is called mere awareness. But when one has purified all mental obscurations, and there is nothing left to purify, then it is called double purity. I usually say that mere awareness is the uncut diamond, whilst

*dharmadhatu* is the diamond cut and polished. The quality is the same, but the appearance has changed.

In Mahayana Buddhism, we speak of this mere awareness as *alaya* consciousness, which contains all the karmic seeds and inputs in our mental continuum. For a sentient being, this continues through cycles of rebirth, until reaching Buddhahood – whether one is awake or asleep, there is a continuation of that consciousness.

From an awareness point of view, we and the Buddha have no differences, in terms of awareness. The only difference is that our awareness is obscured, whilst the Buddha's awareness is free from obscurations. Thinking in this way, there is hope that we can attain Buddhahood. There is also hope from a historical point of view. As I mentioned before, historically, the Buddha was in the hell realm and went through three countless aeons of great compassion until he reached Buddhahood. Every one of us can do the same thing – if we practise compassion for three countless aeons, then one day we will be free from this inner prison of defilements and can reach perfect Buddhahood. This is the meaning of *she*.

*Rab* means superior awareness, once one has studied the Dharma. After listening to the Dharma, we go home to study and contemplate further. This brings more clarity and improves our awareness. If any improvement in awareness comes out of this study and contemplation, that awareness is closer to absolute truth or perfected wisdom. Whereas, without study and contemplation, our awareness is not necessarily closer to the truth. For instance, many of us are aware of what is in front of us, and we think this is reality. But when we think that we are at a great distance from true reality! The Dharma says that our conventional awareness of reality is only reality in the illusion state of the mind. Once we remove this illusion mind, what we currently think is reality does not exist; it is a projection of our mind.

As we learn this, we then start to doubt that what we are seeing in front of us is the truth, because the Dharma says it is just an illusion. Our view on the object then shifts a little bit. But this on its own is not enough to convert one to seeing conventional reality as an illusion. One needs to keep studying, experimenting and practising. Then, over time, one can start to see

that conventional reality is an illusion, it is not real.

At this point, one naturally starts to become less attached. The reason we are attached is because we expect that the object we are attached to is going to give us what we want. Then, when you discover that the object of attachment is an illusion, a projection, you realise it isn't going to give you what you want. So, naturally, you will have less attachment.

We can see this illustrated in human relationships. For example, when we meet someone who becomes our partner. At first one thinks that this person is going to give us happiness, and we fall in love. Then one day, you don't get what you want from that person, and then you no longer want to be with them. When one sees the reality, that this person is not going to give you what you want, your attachment to them declines.

Similarly, we think other objects will give us what we want, but these objects are never going to give you what you want because they are not real, it is illusion. To realise the true nature and reality of the object is *rub* – superior mind. The superior mind is the omniscient mind; this omniscient mind is beyond samsara and nirvana.

These are the brief meanings of key words in the title of *Bhagavati Prajnaparamita Hridaya*. If you know the meanings of these words, then you know the meaning of the title of this teaching, translated in English as *The Buddha's Essence of the Perfection of Wisdom*.

# Main teaching: The Heart Sutra

This *Heart Sutra* is short, only twenty-five verses, just the essence of the *Perfection of Wisdom* teaching. I will explain each of the main paragraphs of this sutra.

The first paragraph pays homage to the Triple Gem. Then, the second paragraph is:

*Thus I have heard, at one time, the Blessed One was abiding at Vulture's Peak in Rajagriha, together with a great assembly of bhikshus and a great assembly of bodhisattvas.*

This paragraph of the teaching raises two topics: the 'four excellences', and the 'excellent Dharma', which is the main body of the *Heart Sutra*. The four excellences are: excellent time, excellent teacher, excellent place and excellent followers. These represent the circumstances in which the teaching took place.

## The four excellences

### Excellent time

Whenever one hears the Dharma, we refer to that as an 'excellent time'. For example, when you have had a wonderful time, you will say, 'I just had an excellent time'. Similarly, because the Dharma is the only medicine to free us from all miseries, the Dharma is the source of all happiness. So, when one has time to hear the Dharma, there is no greater time than that moment. This is why we call it an excellent time.

This phrase is explaining that one has heard the essence of the wisdom but has not yet realised the profoundness of this *Perfection of Wisdom*. This shows us that, for the ordinary mind, it is extremely difficult to realise this profound meaning. Again, everything is relative – for example, every one of us now are listening to this Dharma out of the cloud of the defiled mind, so there is no way to truly understand this profoundness. One day, we will purify this cloud of delusion, then there will be less delusion there. Then, when we listen to this teaching, it will no longer feel difficult to understand but almost like a normal action, like making a cup of tea – understanding it becomes easy. But this requires a very clean mind.

So, the profoundness and difficulty of the teaching is relative and dependent on what state of mind you listen with. We are speaking of the profoundness and difficulty of realising emptiness from the base of our untrained mind. But once you purify your mind, then it is not so profound and not that deep to understand. So, the word ‘profound’ is for us to hear: ‘Thus I have heard at one time.’

Then ‘Thus I’ has a meaning. ‘I’ have not heard this *Perfection of Wisdom* indirectly, ‘I’ have heard this directly from the Buddha. Now, you are all hearing this commentary from me, and I’ve heard this commentary from my master, who heard it from his master. Tracing this back, it will probably go eighty to ninety generations back to the Buddha, which is completely indirect. In contrast, this person is saying they have heard this directly, not through a third person.

Normally, when I say something about what has happened to myself, you will hear what I experienced, but if you share what I told you with someone else, then you will normally unintentionally add something else to the story or leave something out. So, 75 per cent of the story will be what I said, and the other 25 per cent will be your own thoughts. This continues when a third person hears the story, so then 50 per cent is accurate and 50 per cent is exaggerated, added or lost. So, by the time there are 10 people telling of this experience, it is a totally different story! This is why the Tibetans have depended so much on the written texts to keep the Dharma pure. One must always go back to the texts, to reduce the possibility of adding or removing



something from the teaching. At the end of the day, we must go back to the root text.

I know in the Western world, people like to talk spontaneously. But doing this with the Dharma without direct reference to the text will, in the end, lose the essence. For this reason, if you look at the great masters, they all rely on the texts. Even if they do not need it, they make sure what they are saying will not contradict the root text. Relying on the text then, generation after generation, the Dharma will stay accurate. This is why, when we are giving a teaching, it is always based on the text. This represents the excellent time.

## Excellent teacher

Second is the excellent teacher. The excellent teacher is the Buddha. The great Indian Master, Nagarjuna, paid homage to the Buddha right at the beginning of the *Mulamadhymakakarika*: 'I am going to pay homage to the supreme teacher'. The Buddha is the supreme teacher. He is supreme because he clearly and completely explained what absolute truth is, without any mistakes. Only the Buddha taught in a complete and perfect way on absolute truth.

Absolute truth is that everything is interdependent, nothing is independent. So, in an absolute state there is no arising and no cessation of objects. Cessation and arising are only mental conceptions. Conventionally, we see cessation and arising, but if we take away this conventional perception, then in absolute terms, there is no arising or cessation. This is just a brief explanation. We will discuss it further below.

Secondly, there is neither nihilism nor anti-nihilism. In absolute terms, there is no coming and no departing, there is no single entity and manifolds. The absolute is beyond the ordinary mind and ordinary word to explain. Only the Buddha explained this absolute truth perfectly and without any mistakes. This is why Nagarjuna stated, 'I am going to pay homage to the supreme teacher'. The excellent teacher is the Buddha.

Think about one's lama – any teacher who teaches according to what the Buddha taught, that person you can call a lama. Lama doesn't mean a teacher who makes you laugh a lot, entertains you, makes the time seem so wonderful.

This is not the meaning of lama. Lama means someone who is representing the Buddha, someone who speaks what the Buddha spoke. Now, what does disciple mean? Being a disciple means that you have a lama that teaches you exactly what the Buddha taught, and what you have learned you are integrating into your everyday life. Then you are a disciple.

## Excellent place

The third excellence is the excellent place. The Buddha did not accidentally stop at Vulture's Peak to teach the *Perfection of Wisdom*. He chose that specific geographical place, because he knew teaching the Perfection of Wisdom at this geographical place would benefit countless sentient beings. Some great masters say Vulture's Peak is not just a mere historical place. Some great masters, who have pure vision, when they go to Vulture's Peak in today's time, they say the Buddha actually still stays there, turning the *Perfection of Wisdom* wheel of dharma, and they can see all the sangha receiving this teaching right now. I and others with impure vision or impure perception go to this place to pay our respects, because we believe that the Buddha actually was there and taught the *Perfection of Wisdom*. We treat this place as historical, but a great master can see and say that the Buddha still resides there and continues to turn the wheel of dharma. So, Vulture's Peak is a very special place. This we call the excellent place.

## Excellent Followers

The fourth excellence is excellent followers. There are two types of excellent followers. When the Buddha taught the *Perfection of Wisdom*, it was to a special group. The first group was all the fully ordained people, and the second was all the great bodhisattvas. The first group is referred to as the *Maha-sangha* in Sanskrit. I am not sure how to translate that into English, maybe the 'great disciples'. The second group is referred to as *mahabodhisattva*, meaning the 'great bodhisattvas'.

When we refer to the great disciples, there are two meanings of 'great'; one

is from a number point of view and the other from a quality point of view.

From a number point of view, when the Buddha taught the *Perfection of Wisdom*, there were around 5,000 fully ordained sangha present. We need to be aware of what it means to be a fully ordained person, as this is bordering on impossible these days. To be ordained, there are over 200 vows one must make every day. In this modern time, it is almost impossible to do this. When you see monks or nuns on the street, they may say they have received full ordination, and this may be their right intention, but actually it is almost impossible in this time to have these perfect and undamaged vows.

In the Buddha's time, when it is said there were 5,000 fully ordained people, they truly were fully ordained, without any mistakes with their vows, not even a tiny one. It is incredible to think that there was that perfect amount of perfect sangha gathered in this place to receive the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutra. This is the number point of view. This is very important.

From a quality point of view, these were not only fully ordained people, all of them were arhats. An arhat is free from samsara. There are two types of arhats: one is called 'definitive arhat', and the other is referred to as 'interpretive arhat'. Definitive arhat means an arhat who sees that samsara is full of suffering, so decides it is not worth returning to it, and therefore they should practise completely for themselves and be free from samsara. Their focus is only on their own self-liberation from samsara. An interpretive arhat sees that they can attain something better than the arhat state, their goal is to move towards buddhahood, to help relieve the suffering of all sentient beings. So, they physically act as an arhat, but internally are a bodhisattva. This is the reason that they came to hear the *Perfection of Wisdom*. So, as to their number, there were 5,000 fully ordained people present, and from the quality point of view they were all arhats; they are called the Maha-sangha.

The second group, the mahabodhisattva, were the main audience when the Buddha gave this teaching. From a number point of view, it is said that over a million bodhisattvas were present when the Buddha taught the *Perfection of Wisdom*. If you go to Vulture's Peak, you will see it is a mountain. That whole mountain was covered with bodhisattvas! One could hardly see any empty space at that time, it was completely covered. So, there were an

inconceivable number of bodhisattvas there when the Buddha taught the *Perfection of Wisdom*.

From a quality point of view, we say they were 'great bodhisattvas'. All these bodhisattvas had already attained the first to tenth bhumis, they were not ordinary bodhisattvas. There are different levels in being a bodhisattva. One is a bodhisattva if one sincerely realises that all sentient beings are our mother and they are suffering, and that attaining buddhahood is the best way to help them. If we listen to the dharma, and are truly inspired and genuine about wanting to do this, and out of that motivation to help all sentient beings we take the bodhisattva vow, then, as soon as one takes this vow, we are bodhisattvas. Yet this is not permanent. For as long as you hold this intention and vow, you are a bodhisattva, but you have not entered any path as yet. This is called the 'non-entering bodhisattva'.

Then, if one becomes seriously committed, one can enter the path of accumulation, path of application and so forth. These are much more serious and committed bodhisattvas, and they are called 'mahabodhisattvas'. But they are not enlightened yet. So, from here, they progress, till one day they realise and cognise absolute truth. By 'cognise' we mean that through study, they come to understand absolute truth.

To help understand the progression of bodhisattvas, imagine someone, a friend, who has never been in the town of Milton. But we have been to Milton, so we can explain this place to that friend. This friend can then get some kind of image of Milton. But there will be a big difference between this image and the reality. But still, they will have some kind of idea of Milton. Similarly, when we study emptiness, we can get some idea of it, but mostly our idea is not right.

Then imagine we show this friend some pictures of Milton. They will then have a clearer and more accurate image of this place, yet still it will not be perfectly accurate. This is like contemplation and study of the Dharma. The more you study and contemplate on emptiness, the clearer your understanding becomes, but it is still not perfect.

Then one day, you ask this friend to come with you to Milton, and they can then see directly what Milton is like. Then they will experience exactly what

Milton looks like, with accuracy. This is like the first bhumi, the enlightened state. Now you are seeing not through others' interpretations, not through what you heard and not through a picture – you are seeing the real place and seeing it directly.

But when your friend comes to see Milton, it is not enough to just see the main street, your friend must drive around, explore in a sense. Similarly, from the enlightened state of the first bhumi, as you 'explore' you can progress up to second, third and fourth bhumi. Then, once you know everything you can draw a map of this place, and then you have reached the tenth bhumi! The mahabodhisattva is an enlightened first to tenth bhumi bodhisattva. These are the Excellent Followers.

## Excellent Dharma

So far, we have been talking about excellence in general, the Four Excellences. These are the circumstances in which the teaching took place. Now, we will talk about excellence in particular, excellent Dharma. This constitutes the main body of the *Heart Sutra*.

When explaining excellent dharma, it is important to understand the difference between sutras and shastras. Sutras contain a perfect and complete meaning, having few words yet explaining everything. In comparison, shastras contain a lot of words, but they explain little. It is important to have shastras for beginner practitioners, because beginners need lots of words to understand the point. But the most advanced practitioners can hear few words and then understand everything. So, people who understand the sutras are superior, and people who study the shastras are inferior. This does not mean one is inferior in a general sense, for you are still intelligent, but in one's understanding of the sutra, one is inferior. But it is all relative. For example, this inferior understanding is superior compared to many who do not understand the Dharma at all!

The third paragraph says:

*At that time, the Blessed One was absorbed in the samadhi called 'Profound Illumination'.*

Samadhi is one-pointed meditation, and profound illumination is the union of the awareness and emptiness state of meditation. First, the Buddha blessed the sutra, then secondly the Buddha directly spoke the sutra, and thirdly the Buddha gave permission for the sutra to be explained.

## The blessing

Let me distinguish between blessing from a religious point of view and a philosophical point of view. A religious view of blessing is when one goes to a church or a temple, and the priest or monk gives you some kind of special drink or food, or touches your head, et cetera. In contrast, a philosophical blessing is when a teacher explains to you what reality is. Of course, they cannot give their mind to you, but this explanation can help bring one's mind to see this reality, to wake one's mind up from ignorance and bring it to wisdom. This is the blessing.

Firstly, the Buddha sat in a meditative state. But there are so many different types of meditative states. In this case, the Buddha and all the sangha bodhisattvas were gathered together and emptiness, what we call absolute truth, manifested in an object form, representing the union of appearance and emptiness. Whilst the Buddha meditated in this state, he then blessed the *Perfection of Wisdom* teaching to be explained to the great disciples and great bodhisattvas. He did not speak this teaching directly, he blessed two others to speak from the heart of the Buddha – Shariputra and Arya Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of compassion.

Shariputra was blessed as the person to ask deep questions. Arya Avalokiteshvara was blessed as the person to answer the questions. So, together they acted as one who asks the questions and the one who provides the answers. But both of them were representing the Buddha, which is the blessing. The Buddha blessed them to have wisdom, from Shariputra the wisdom to ask perfect questions, and from Arya Avalokiteshvara the wisdom to provide perfect answers.

*Arya* is Sanskrit and means *phagpa* in Tibetan. In English, it means enlightenment. But in English, the word 'enlightened' can also mean just

an ordinary being who is intelligent, learned, bright-minded. But in the Buddhist context, no matter how intelligent and learned you are, you will not be called *phagpa* unless you realise the truth of emptiness. This title is only for someone who realises this absolute truth. To be called *phagpa*, one must be free from the obscuration of mental defilements, meaning someone who has realised the emptiness of self and phenomena. Only then are you enlightened in the Buddhist sense and referred to as *phagpa*.

## The five aggregates

Paragraph 4 says:

*Also at that time, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva, Arya Avalokiteshvara, was reviewing the profound characteristics of the Prajnaparamita and realised the natural emptiness of the five aggregates.*

Arya Avalokiteshvara wanted to know what absolute truth is. He then meditated on the absolute truth, or emptiness, of the five aggregates. Each person experiences the conventional world through the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness. Together, they make up our conventional experience of the world and give rise to grasping and attachment.

But when one realises the natural emptiness of the five aggregates, that they are empty by nature, then one asks oneself: 'Where is this object that I want to attach to? Which part of it can I attach to?' You will not be able to find any such object that you can attach to. In this way, our mind starts looking outwardly less often. Because we realise there is no external object actually there, we can turn our mind inward, starting to get less distracted. When we think everything is externally real, we become outwardly distracted. But once the natural emptiness of objects is discovered, there is nothing to distract us from looking inward, from minding our own mind, rather than being busy with external things.

## Intention behind asking questions

Then, Shariputra asked the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara:

*How should one of noble lineage train, who wishes to practise the profound perfection of wisdom?*

Normally, when you ask questions during a Dharma discussion, there are two ways of doing this – from the intellect or from the heart. Some of us are interested in studying the Buddhadharmā for intellectual gain. From this perspective, when we hear something, it may be unclear, we feel hesitation or doubt, so then we ask a question in order to gain more clarity. This is good, but not as good as asking from the heart.

Asking from the heart means, for example, let's say one of us may be terminally ill but there can be a chance to overcome this. So, we go to see the doctor and ask what kind of diet should we follow, what medicine should we take, what treatment should we have. And these questions feel very serious, because we really want to survive rather than die. So, these questions come from the heart, from emotions.

So, some questions are emotional, and some are just intellectual. Those asking from the intellect and those asking from emotion may be asking the same question, yet there are vast differences. The emotional questions are more personal, because here the aim is not just intellectual gain, this person is traumatised within samsara. And not just this person, but all sentient beings are traumatised through suffering in samsara, and want it to end. So, then one will ask questions from the heart – these will be very serious questions, because one really wants an end to suffering.

Shariputra's questions were very serious. Shariputra was blessed by the Buddha to ask a question. He rose from his cushion, then knelt, put his hands in prayer mudra and seriously asked this question to Arya Avalokiteshvara:

*How should one of noble lineage train, who wishes to practise the profound perfection of wisdom?*

When we say 'noble' son or daughter, in Tibetan we call it *reche pur*. In ancient times this meant that the son or daughter followed their race, and when they grow up they then represent this family race. But as a Dharma



practitioner, our job is to come to the Buddha to help all sentient beings. This means you are born into the Buddha's family, with the potential that one day you too can become like the Buddha and help all sentient beings. Such a person is known as a noble son or daughter, who truly wishes to attain buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings; someone who has genuinely cultivated bodhicitta.

But if one asks a question without having bodhicitta mind, without the serious desire to gain buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings, then one is not a 'noble' son or daughter. People may ask the exact same question, yet if one has the genuine bodhicitta intention and the other has not, then one is a noble son or daughter and the other is not. There are vast differences, because being based on bodhicitta mind makes the question extremely serious.

## Innate emptiness of the five aggregates

In paragraph 6, Arya Avalokiteshvara replied to Shariputra:

*Those of noble lineage who wish to practise the profound perfection of wisdom should correctly view the five aggregates as empty by inherent existence.*

Arya Avalokiteshvara meditated on absolute truth, as described above, and observed the innate emptiness of the five aggregates. We may say that there are two aspects to the aggregates, appearance and intrinsic nature. While they may appear to have independent existence, intrinsically they are empty by nature. Looking not from a conventional appearance point of view, but from an absolute truth point of view, the innate nature of the five aggregates is emptiness.

When the Buddha turned the wheel of Dharma, on the first turning he taught the *Four Noble Truths*: the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. In the third noble truth, the truth of cessation of suffering, he is talking about emptiness. But that explanation is aimed at common disciples. The second turning of the wheel, the teaching on *Perfection of Wisdom*, is aimed at uncommon disciples, and is a much more elaborated teaching on emptiness. In this context, uncommon means that

all the disciples listening to the *Prajnaparamita* at this time were excellent followers, as described above.

The main purpose of this discussion of emptiness is to free us from suffering. This is so important to remember. To be free of suffering, we need to better understand why we experience suffering. The suffering that we experience is a result of karma, and karma is created by our mental defilements. Defilement of the mind sees phenomena as real, not empty. Because we think external objects are real, this increases our desire mind and we work to get these things, we start grasping. Similarly, we see things that we want to reject, which increases aversion mind. We are then creating negative karma, by increasing our desire mind and aversion mind. All this suffering and negative karma is caused by seeing phenomena as real. We need to tackle the root cause of that suffering, which is that the mind sees these objects as real.

In order to free your mind from grasping, you must tell your mind that the object you are grasping is not real. For example, say one of your friends or one of your children is falling in love with someone. But this person genuinely does not care for your friend or child, just wants to take advantage of them. But your loved one does not realise this and thinks, 'Oh, I love this person so much!' But actually, they are being victimised, taken advantage of. We feel sorry for our loved one, because they cannot see what is really happening, yet we can see it. But eventually, our loved one may see that this partner is not giving them any care or love, but rather always taking advantage and causing suffering. As soon as they see this, their desire for the person diminishes.

I am not sure if this is a good example, but we are all married – whether to a person, possession or wealth. Because when we are 'married' or attached to an object, we think it will give us everything we want. But all that this attachment to objects can give us is suffering. It is only when we can truly see that, that we can be less attached. This is why we need to understand that form is emptiness. It is very hard to explain, but within this limited time and with my limited knowledge, we will talk a little bit about form is emptiness.

## The two truths

Now we go straight into trying to understand emptiness and what it is supposed to be. But to understand emptiness, there is one requirement and prerequisite, which is to be aware of the two truths: conventional truth and absolute truth.

The main topic of the *Prajnaparamita* is emptiness. But we must remember that we do not talk of emptiness in every circumstance. We talk of emptiness at the absolute level, not at the conventional level. It is important not to mix them up. For example, the Indian master, Chandrakirti, said: 'If you speak of conventional emptiness, this would then be mixed and would be extremely confusing'. So, at a conventional level, we should accept that external objects exist – I can see them, you and I can feel them, et cetera. At the conventional level, we see external objects as existent, but in the absolute state, we will not be able to find any such objects. When we speak of conventional truth, it is whatever we perceive from the ordinary mind.

Yet, conventional truth is false. For example, we all look at the same object, but perceive it in different ways. But if objects truly existed separately from our mind, then we should all perceive them in the same way. So, these perceptions must be false phenomena. With absolute phenomena, no object exists separately from the ordinary mind. Absolute is the object of the uncontaminated primordial mind, the enlightened mind. Currently, you cannot experience it and I cannot experience it, because we have an ordinary, unenlightened mind. At the same time, intellectually, if we investigate and listen to this logic, there may be a way we can understand a bit, because the absolute is not beyond explanation. So, by following the explanation, you can achieve some idea of emptiness. Yet, to truly experience this emptiness, one must be free from delusion mind.

When we talk about being able to see emptiness, this can cause confusion, because we think that in order to see something there must be an object, we think if there is no object, there is nothing to see. But when you can understand some part of absolute truth, you will realise that we are not speaking of this objectively. There is no dualistic view of self that is separate

from object, emptiness is a non-dualistic state. So, to say there is nothing to see, is seeing it – this is the truth.

## Form aggregate

In Paragraph 7, Arya Avalokiteshvara continued:

*Form is emptiness, emptiness is also form, emptiness is not other than form and form is not other than emptiness*

The four experiences we need to develop are based on these four emptinesses. These are the four experiences we need to have in order to understand emptiness.

### *The four emptinesses*

To begin with, we will discuss ‘form is emptiness’. By ‘form’, we mean a physical object. When you see a form or object, if it really existed, then it would exist independently. That is, it would exist independently of us and independently of other objects. But all forms are interdependent, nothing has independent existence. To exist independently, the form would have to be uncreated, that is, always exist as it is and not be dependent on other forms for existence. But we cannot find any form that is uncreated, everything is created. In this way, form does not independently exist as we perceive it to, that is, it does not exist as just one thing; it has changed many times during its creation.

Similarly, there are so many aspects of form. For example, form has sound, form has smell, form has taste, form has touch. Altogether, there are around twelve or thirteen aspects gathered to make one single form. From this point of view, form is a projection of many causes and conditions, not a single entity, not singularly independent. When this all comes together, we perceive a gross form and we think it is just one thing. Yet, the reality is that it is not just one thing, it has many aspects and each aspect is in itself a form.

So, any one object also takes many forms. These many forms come together as the object’s shape, colour, size, et cetera. Yet, each of these aspects do not

exist independently, they are created by the coming together of all the aspects. So, if we look at all these things, one cannot find a single independently existing form that is not dependent on the simultaneous existence of other forms. This is one simple method to see that form is not real.

### *The Four Possibilities for Independent Arising*

Now, let's go deeper and use a more complicated logic. If a form is truly existent, then there are only four possibilities: the form must have arisen from itself, or arisen from others, or arisen from both itself and others, or have arisen without any cause. There is no fifth possibility.

So, let's investigate this. If objects arise from themselves, then we wouldn't need to make them. For example, this glass bowl in front of me. It would already exist. However, we or somebody else has created it. Someone mined the glass, someone moulded the bowl, someone painted it, someone sold it, someone bought it, and someone broke it – just kidding! For this bowl to be sitting right now on this table, just think how much change it has been through. It was never just one thing. If we investigate its history, we can see it is not just one independently existing thing. And if you try to separate the steps in its creation, then you cannot find the bowl. Seeing the bowl as one object is just a trick of your mind to create the illusion of existence. We think objects are just one thing, but when we consider the reality or history of an object, we can see that they are never just one thing, all objects are composed of many things.

Another example is that a tree arises from a seed. If objects arise from self, then a seed could only produce a seed, and a tree would produce a tree, not a seed. In this way, we can again see that there is no way that things can arise from self.

Things cannot arise from the other. If cause and effect exist independently of each other, they cannot be set in a causal relationship to each other. A tree cannot arise from a seed because a tree is a tree and seed is a seed. It follows that cause and non-cause are on an equal footing. Chandrakirti explained in the *Madhyamakavatara* that if it was possible for a thing to derive from

a cause other than itself then a flame could give rise to darkness. In other words, anything could produce anything. There is no way a thing can arise from other.

Can things arise from both self and other? We think of results and causes as two separate things, as in not having a connection with one another, in that the result can exist independently of the cause. But if they weren't connected, then they would be two separate phenomena, and when two separate independent phenomena are put together, nothing can arise. If independently existing phenomena could create other phenomena, then dark could potentially produce light, and an elephant could potentially produce a lion's baby. But this is impossible, for these two separate phenomena cannot produce each other. Two phenomena can only produce each other if they are not separate, if they are interdependently connected, as in the seed and the tree. So, we see that it is not possible for things to arise from the self and other as two separate phenomena, only as interconnected phenomena.

Can things arise without any cause, from neither self or other? For example, the seed provides the cause that results in the tree. We may not be philosophers or scientists, yet we all know that everything comes with effort. Without any cause, nothing can arise. So, logic tells us that nothing can arise without a cause.

If we understand that 'form is emptiness', then the remaining emptinesses – 'emptiness is form', 'emptiness is not other than form' and 'form is not other than emptiness' – are similar.

Let's look at it in this way – when we look at any visual form, in that this mind is perceiving that form, then either what we perceive is our mental perception of that form and the form does not exist independently of our perception of it, or the form actually does exist separately from our perception of it. But if form exists separately from our mind, then no matter what our emotional state is, we would always see the form in the same way. But this is not so. When we are happy and look at an object, we see one thing. When we are unhappy and look at the same object, we view it differently. When we are in anger and look at the object, we see it in a different way again. Realising this can help us with everything that we perceive outwardly, which we then

label. We can ask ourselves, 'Does this really exist outwardly separate from our mind, or does it change when our mind changes?'

This is a particularly useful way to analyse the fundamental emptiness of objects. Continue to investigate from your own experience, then one day you may get it, that is, 'Now I understand what 'form is emptiness' means!'. It takes time to understand the point that form is emptiness. But the benefit is that we will see the lack of substance and interconnectedness of all things. Currently we are so stressed, we get so tired and our muscles get so tense, and all this occurs because we see our perceptions as objectively real. But the moment one discovers absolute truth, that our perceptions are dependent on our mind, then nothing will bother you, you will relax. When one discovers absolute truth, it is the great peace, nirvana.

### *The four experiences*

The four emptinesses give rise to the four experiences of emptiness. The first experience of emptiness is of 'form as emptiness'. The second experience, is of 'emptiness as form'. Within emptiness everything is possible. If there was no emptiness of objects, that is if they were truly independently arising, then whatever exists would have to remain that way forever. But because of emptiness, there is change, impermanence. So, if you are an ordinary person you can become enlightened, because of emptiness. If there was no emptiness, then there would be no change, and if you were ordinary, you would remain ordinary. But in absolute truth, everything is changeable.

The third experience is of 'emptiness as not other than form'. This means that emptiness is not separate from form. The distinction between the two truths, conventional and absolute truth, is based on the distinction between the delusional or defiled mind and the non-defiled mind. With the delusional mind we see form, whereas with the non-defiled mind we do not see form. This means that form is not other than emptiness, form is not separate from emptiness. If form were separate from emptiness, then you would be able to find the form without emptiness, but this is not findable.

The fourth experience is of 'form as not other than emptiness'. This means

that form is not separate from emptiness. This is similar to the experience of form as not other than emptiness. Conventionally we see the form, whereas absolutely we see emptiness – they are inseparable.

An example is with fire not being separate from heat. You cannot find heat separate from the fire that causes it, and you cannot find fire without the heat that results from it. We can see fire, as in a flame, but we cannot see the heat, we can only feel it. So, fire and heat are not one, because if they were one, we would be able to see the heat as we can the fire. But then, they are also not separate, because if they were separate we would find fire without heat. We are not able to find these things, so in this way, it can be seen that fire and heat are neither separate things nor one thing.

Similarly, when it is said that form is not separate from emptiness, it means that form and emptiness are not separate things. And when we say emptiness is not separate from form, it means that form and emptiness are not one. Form and emptiness are beyond one thing and beyond separate things.

These then are the four experiences of the emptiness of form – form as emptiness, emptiness as form, emptiness as not other than form and form as not other than emptiness.

## The feeling aggregate

So far, we have been talking about the emptiness of the form aggregate. But it is the same approach and logic with the other four aggregates: the feeling aggregate, the perception aggregate, the mental formation aggregate, and the consciousness aggregate. By following the same logic as with the form aggregate, we can say that: feeling is emptiness, emptiness is feeling, feeling is not other than emptiness, and emptiness is not other than feeling. Then one must meditate on this.

When we refer to feeling, again we are attached to our good feelings and we are upset with our bad feelings; we think that feeling is a single entity. So, it is important to explore what kind of things constitute feeling. Feeling requires lots of aspects – firstly, we need to involve our karma to feel something, secondly, we need our consciousness to see the object, and thirdly we need



the object in order to see it. Then one can feel good, bad or indifferent. But if one of these aspects is absent, then there is nothing to feel, because feeling cannot arise by itself.

From this point of view, feeling is created by many causes and conditions, it does not exist independently. For this reason, the nature of feeling is emptiness, and it is out of emptiness that feeling can manifest. What allows us to feel different things is through the nature of emptiness. As already explained with form, emptiness is what enables change in perception. If feeling were not empty, then we would not be able to change the feeling, it would always independently exist as the same feeling all the time.

For instance, some of us love coffee and won't drink anything else. Then some of us prefer water, while others may think, 'plain water - how awful!'. But is this feeling of awfulness due to the water or is it because of one's mind? To prove that it is one's mind, let's look at another example. If one is walking in the desert for hours, at some point you will get so thirsty, and if the only thing you have to drink is water, at this time the water seems so yummy, tasty and enjoyable. So, why suddenly in the desert would one's taste change? The water has not changed, for it is the same water; it is the mind that has changed.

In this way, we can see that feeling is just made up from the mind. The things that make me feel good, those very phenomena cause others to feel uncomfortable. Similarly, something that makes me feel good today may make me feel differently tomorrow, and something that makes me feel not good today may make me feel better tomorrow. It depends on what kind of mind set one has when experiencing different things.

As Chandrakirti says: 'We fail to realise that everything is labelled by the mind, rather we think that all things exist separable from the mind, but it is the mind that makes up everything.' This is particularly useful to meditate on, using meditation to help clean up ignorance mind, not just to relax. Ultimate relaxation will come when we are free of ignorance mind.

The same intention should be used when practising shamatha meditation. Shamatha can bring one a certain calmness for the time being, but shamatha alone cannot bring lasting peace without vipassana. Vipassana meditation is

much more effective than shamatha in taking you a further distance in the same amount of time. The whole purpose of shamatha is to prepare your mind to practise vipassana. So, to just practise shamatha without vipassana is not healthy from a Dharma point of view. But shamatha is still important. If you do vipassana without shamatha, the highest level of rebirth you can reach is in the form realm. Being there for aeons will delay the attainment of buddhahood, which is quite dangerous from a Dharma point of view. The whole reason we practise shamatha is to prepare our mind to gain vipassana and to understand absolute truth.

### The perception aggregate

It is similar with the perception aggregate. There is impure perception and pure perception. These are different stages of the mind. Impure perception is when we fail to be aware that things do not exist out there as we perceive them; instead, we think we are perceiving things that truly exist out there. But if things truly exist out there and are perceived in this way, then why do others perceive them in a different way, what is the reason for this? The reason is that one's mind is creating a particular object, then whatever we create, accordingly we perceive it. So, in this way, the mind is both the object (what is perceived) and the subject (the one who perceives). There is not an object separate from a subject. This is what is called non-dualism.

Perception is emptiness and emptiness is perception. That is, our different perceptions of phenomena come out of the inherent emptiness of phenomena. Emptiness means that nothing is inherently fixed in nature. This is why we can perceive anything we like in objects – as being good, bad or neutral. If phenomena were fixed in nature, there would be no choices. Because things do not really exist as we think they do, this is why we are able to perceive them as we would like, depending on one's karma and circumstances, and on causes and conditions.

## The mental formation aggregate

Now we move onto mental formation. There are fifty-one secondary minds. From a defiled mind point of view, there is, for example, desire mind and anger mind. Then from a Dharma path point of view, there is for example, faith, compassion, loving-kindness and wisdom, which are all from the secondary mind.

But again, the nature of mental formation is emptiness. It is out of inherent emptiness that all these secondary minds or thoughts arise. Mental formation is not separate from emptiness, and emptiness is not separate from mental formation. This leads to another four experiences: Mental formation is emptiness, emptiness is mental formation, emptiness is not other than mental formation, mental formation is not other than emptiness. This is absolute truth.

## The consciousness aggregate

Then there is consciousness, as in mental consciousness and sense organ consciousness (that is, sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch). As with the other four aggregates, the aim of discussing consciousness is to see how we can use it to better understand emptiness. How can we use the experience of consciousness to understand emptiness?

### *Sense organ consciousnesses*

For example, with eye consciousness, when one looks at the full moon at night time near a lake, one can clearly see a reflection of the moon on the lake. Yet, we know there is no real moon in the lake. Another example is when one goes to a mountain area and shouts, there will be an echo. It sounds as if someone is shouting back at us, but if one investigates, the shouting does not really exist, it's just a reflection of one's own sound. Another example of emptiness is with smell. For instance, when one is very hungry and comes close to a restaurant, just seeing the display of meals, even if it is all plastic,

one can sometimes still smell it! From past habit, we know the smell. So, even if there is no aroma, we can smell that particular food when we see it.

Actually, all of these things we are speaking of are driven by mental habit. When a certain habit meets a condition, then we remember it, not realising it is just a habit. We then get caught up with thinking it is real. Contemplating emptiness is a great method to liberate us from being stuck in habits of the mind, which is the whole point – to free our minds.

Sense organ consciousnesses conventionally have four aspects: the first three – mind, organ and visual object - generally are the creators of consciousness, as in creating the immediate conditions for consciousness. The first aspect is the mind, meaning that the previous mind is the cause of the present mind, previous mental habits are the cause of current mental habits, that is, the mind produces the mind. The second aspect is the organ, for example the eye organ, where inside the pupil there is a subtle form that has the energy to create the eye consciousness, called the fundamental condition. Thirdly, there is the visual object. When these three aspects come together, there is the eye consciousness to see something.

The fourth aspect is karma. Karma, combined with the first three aspects, constitutes the requirements to develop consciousness. But to see what a human sees, it needs to be human karma. If one does not have human karma, such as for one who has animal karma, there will still be the three aspects, but the object will be seen differently if one is a human or one is an animal. Another example concerns a glass of water. For human beings, a glass of water is for drinking, but a fish would see this glass of water as a place to live, and hell beings would see the glass of water as molten lava – to drink it, they would burn themselves. For humans, drinking this water quenches their thirst, but the same water burns the throat of a hell being because it is mentally created as fire.

So, reality does not exist out there, reality is created by our own mind. Then what one perceives as reality, then becomes reality from your perspective. But outside of the mind, there is no reality out there. If reality existed independently of our minds, then fish seeing the water in a glass as a home, and humans seeing the water as something to drink to quench their thirst,

this discrepancy in the external object could not exist – which one is the reality? In this way, we see that reality is an individual state of mind, because there is no common agreement on what out there is the reality.

One day you may not have karma, then you would not have a consciousness to perceive anything. Nothing would exist, because our perception of existence all depends on cause and conditions, and karma is when all the causes and conditions come together. This is when things appear to us. But when the cause and conditions are not there, nothing can appear. This is absolute reality.

The more we think about this, the more beneficial it is. For from the moment we wake up until we go to bed, we never stop thinking. But most of these thoughts are useless or harmful thoughts. No wisdom can arise from these thoughts. Rather, more mental defilements become buried under layers of other defilements. So, reflecting on emptiness is unbelievably valuable, even if you do not understand it straight away. But each day, after reflecting, you will have a slightly better understanding the next day. Then tomorrow, you may manage to bring more wisdom within yourself, and after more reflection, clarity will slowly arise. So, this kind of thought can bring positive fruit in the future, rather than thinking useless or harmful thoughts that will bring nothing in the end but disadvantages.

It is always important to realise that we have the option to choose, that we can invest time to bring the right result. Or we can choose to invest our time in things that will not bring any result but only more trouble. At the end of the day, we have a choice.

### *Mental consciousness*

One way to help understand emptiness from a mental consciousness point of view is to think about when we are dreaming. For example, we may dream we are seeing an elephant or horse. When we awaken, we remember the elephant and horse, but we know they do not really exist. Yet when we dream, we think they are real.

It is the same with all the phenomena we see. We think they are real, but if

we search where these things are, we cannot find them. For example, let's look at the relationship of the eye to mental consciousness. The eye consciousness itself does not see anything that is good or bad, due to having no thoughts, it just sees an object. Yet we humans may say, 'I have seen such a beautiful thing' or 'I have seen this ugly thing', almost as if the eye has the power to see beauty or ugliness. We may think this way, but if one investigates, one finds that the eye has no such power, because the eye is part of the non-conceptual mind. But when the eye and a thought come together, then it is the thought that discriminates, that labels the object, as in 'I like it' or 'I don't like it'.

Another example is a person who has never seen a mirage or never heard of a mirage. Then, the first time that person sees a mirage they think there is water in the distance. Then they go there and find there is no water. They think that the water has disappeared, but in order for the water to disappear there needs to have been water there in the first place. If there was no water there to begin with, then there is nothing to disappear. So, what is really disappearing is one's mental concept. People think that it is the water that is disappearing, but it is not.

Similarly, when one realises emptiness, it is not the object that will disappear. What will disappear is our concept of the object. We think that sentient beings are real, we think the table is real, et cetera. It is this concept that will disappear. Then this absolute view will always be like that, nothing will change this view, there is nothing to be created.

## Meditation experience of emptiness

Altogether, there are twenty different types of meditation based on the five aggregates. The form aggregate has four stages of meditation: form is emptiness, emptiness is form, emptiness is not separate from form, form is not separate from emptiness. Then it is the same for the feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness aggregates. So all together, there are twenty sets of meditations.

If you do these twenty sets of meditations every day, there will be tremendous benefit. The immediate benefit is that, whilst you are thinking of

this, it stops all normal negative habitual thoughts, it stops us from wasting our time. The long-term benefit is, the more you meditate on this in a logical way, each and every time you will gain a little more of an idea of what absolute truth is, taking you closer to understanding, and helping your mind to become wiser.

This is the way past masters progressed day after day. They meditated, and eventually, one day, they found absolute truth. Once they found absolute truth, they were labelled as an enlightened person. But there was not a particular set of cushions or a particular time that helped them to awaken their mind. It happened over time. As I mentioned previously, the Buddha took three countless aeons to perfect his mind. Many of us think that after five minutes we are going to perfect our minds, but that is just not going to happen. Sometimes, people get confused when they read about Milarepa's story of enlightenment, because his teacher, Marpa, hit his shoes on Milarepa's head to make him become awakened. So then, we are looking for a crazy master to hit us over the head so we can become enlightened quickly. But that just isn't going to happen. Because at that point Milarepa was already at an advanced stage, so it only took one small action to remove the remainder of obscuration. This is why Marpa hit him over the head with his shoes. Milarepa was not just lucky to be hit over the head to awaken his mind, there was only one aspect left to clear his mind, so that is why Marpa performed that action.

Chandrakirti says that the wisdom to realise emptiness is not the destroyer of existing phenomena. Because nihilism is when something exists in the beginning, then one destroys it, then there is nothing to perceive. This is not emptiness. Emptiness means primordially, the innate nature or the absolute state never existed in the first place, so one has just discovered this.

To discover absolute truth means not to create absolute truth through praying to the Buddha, but to know how things exist primordially and work hard to recognise it. This is the meditation experience of emptiness.

## The eight profound realisations of emptiness

In paragraph 8, Avalokiteshvara says to Shariputra:

*Noble Shariputra, all dharmas are empty and have no characteristics. They are unborn and unceasing, undefiled and unpurified, neither decreasing nor increasing. Therefore Shariputra, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no mental formations, no consciousness, no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind, no form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no dharma.*

Now, we will discuss the eight profound realisations of emptiness. Firstly, one needs to focus on mere clarity of the mind. This means when we open our eyes and see things, we do not label anything, we just maintain awareness. This is clarity of the mind. Conventionally, we say this clarity is produced by four aspects: karma, immediate conditions, objective conditions and fundamental conditions. In this sense, clarity is created. Out of created clarity, we must accept and not reject conventional reality. If we didn't accept that objects exist in a conventional sense, we wouldn't be able to function in the conventional world; nothing is functional if everything is empty, conventionally speaking. So, we must accept that mere awareness exists conventionally, created by these four aspects.

Now we talk of the absolute perspective. From an absolute perspective, mere awareness does not exist, because for awareness to exist it must firstly be born, or created. But when one searches for the cause of awareness to be born, there is no cause to find. And when there is no cause, there can be no result, that is, awareness. In this way, firstly, mere awareness is unborn, uncreated. Secondly, because it is unborn, it can't abide anywhere, it cannot dwell in any place – as in outside, inside and in between. Lastly, there will be no cessation, no ending. These realisations are called parting from the arising, abiding and cessation. They represent the nature of awareness of the mind.

Awareness and the nature of awareness are two different things. Conventionally, awareness allows one to see things, but absolutely, the nature of awareness is emptiness. For this reason, it is a dualistic state, the union of awareness and emptiness. This dualism helps us to reside or rest in the middle



way. If there were no union of awareness and emptiness, then we would fall into the extremes of nihilism or anti-nihilism. If one falls into one of these extremes, then there is no path to liberation.

The *Madhyamika* says that, for any of us who wish to attain the state of arhatship, bodhisattva or buddhahood, there must be a middle way. So, anyone who takes an extreme path rather than a middle way, is not on a path to gain any of these states of liberation. It is said that all of the shravakas and pratyekabuddhas attain arhatship using this wisdom; all the bodhisattvas reach different stages of the bhūmis due to using this wisdom; and all the buddhas attain full enlightenment also using this wisdom. This wisdom is following the middle way, by not falling into nihilism or anti-nihilism. In this way, this union of awareness and emptiness is the path to gain all stages of enlightenment.

When we perceive things, such as form, feeling, et cetera, the emptiness itself manifests as form and feeling. This is especially important to understand. There is no form or feeling besides emptiness, one will not be able to find one single form or feeling besides emptiness. So, emptiness manifests in the form of the five aggregates. Then we can say emptiness is form, meaning that all the aggregates manifest out of emptiness. And emptiness is not other than form, meaning that emptiness cannot be found separate from form. And the same for all the five aggregates.

At this point, we cannot think of what it looks like beyond our minds, as in what absolute truth looks like, because the mind cannot think about what is absolute truth. The reason is important – because absolute truth is unlimited, and the mind is limited. Whenever the mind thinks of an object or phenomenon, the mind is limited. So, if the mind could think about absolute truth, this would mean absolute truth or emptiness was a limited state, because the mind is limited. But emptiness is limitless. At this point, we may refer to the mahamudra, or the great seal, meaning that every phenomenon's nature is emptiness, and thus beyond the conceptual mind. Because absolute truth is beyond conceptual thought, it therefore cannot be an object of the mind.

Many times, people don't understand when it is said that non-defiled, enlightened, primordial wisdom sees absolute truth, because they think that

to see something there must be an object. But the word 'sees' is not referring to consciousness, it is speaking of 'the view'. There is the object aspect of the view and the subject aspect of the view, where the subject is the perceiver and the object what is perceived. Most people believe that the view is that emptiness is the object aspect, that is, that we are viewing emptiness as an external phenomenon, but in reality it is the subject aspect, that is, the primordial mind's view. From this state, the view is free from everything, free from all the extremes – this is the view and the path, a path that takes one to different stages of enlightenment.

When we talk of primordial wisdom, we are not talking of the dualistic mind in which subject and object are separate, we are talking about the non-dualistic mind in which there is no separation between subject and object. This is because they are interdependent. In this way, emptiness, absolute truth or the view are not mental objects. But there is no word to explain what it is. This is because, while we can express anything that is an object of mind, emptiness is beyond the mind. Therefore, we cannot create a word to express or explain it; it is beyond words. So, emptiness is called beyond expression and beyond thought.

Virtually, one must see emptiness as the sky. For example, when one lives in a town or other place, we refer to the east, south, north and west; we label these directions. But if we look at space itself, there are no directions, it is beyond having directions. Similarly, in the absolute, there are no directions, again it is beyond directions. In this way, one needs to meditate on absolute truth as free space, free sky. There was a great dzogchen master who meditated with wide open eyes, looking at the sky. Looking at the sky helps with all phenomena being likened to the sky. There is no sense of direction, as in a sense of good and bad. For when you look at the sky, it is the same thing, there are no differences. Whether you look at the sky from the northern hemisphere or the southern hemisphere, it is the same sky. Geographically, we refer to the northern sky and the southern sky with the southern cross – but these are stars, not the sky. These are things we need to discover and then meditate on.

After the Buddha attained full enlightenment in Bodhgaya, he immediately

tried to turn the wheel of Dharma. But no one seemed to understand the *Perfection of Wisdom* teaching. He said that absolute truth is beyond expression, it is unborn, with no cessation – like space. But only the primordial mind can see absolute truth, so no one could even try to understand it. So, the Buddha decided to stop turning the wheel of Dharma for a while. Sometime later, Brahma and Indra came down to our world, bringing a conch shell and a thousand spoked dharma wheel to request the Buddha to turn the wheel of dharma again. The Buddha then realised it was the right time to turn the wheel and went to Sarnath to teach. He chose five disciples to receive the teachings of The Four Noble Truths, turning the wheel of Dharma.

So, we need to reflect on how absolute truth is beyond expression. It is the perfection of wisdom, which is unborn and has no cessation. Only the primordial mind can realise it. This wisdom is the mother of all the past, present and future buddhas. Everything is born from this wisdom. Sometimes great masters say, 'I pay homage to the cause', and then naturally, one also pays homage to the result.

All delusion or illusion resides only in the surface of our consciousness. In the depth of the primordial state, there is no illusion, one is free of everything. This is like looking from the ground up to the sky. When we see a cloud obscuring the sky, we cannot imagine that beyond this cloud there is a blue sky, we think it is all cloud. But when we fly in an airplane, we go above the clouds and see blue sky forever. In the same way, it is only the surface of the mental state where we have illusion, or clouds that obscure the sky. Primordially, there is nothing big enough to cloud the entire sky, it doesn't exist. So, there is nothing powerful enough to delude one's primordial nature, the smell of delusion does not exist. The primordial state is smell-less, undefiled.

Now we can summarise the eight profound realisations of emptiness:

1. No characteristics – Emptiness is beyond our thought and beyond expression, we cannot bring any symbol to explain what emptiness looks like, it is beyond definition.
2. Non-created – Emptiness is not a temporary cause and condition that is created – for this reason it is primordially unborn, primordially empty

by its nature.

3. Non-ceasing – Due to being unborn, emptiness is therefore non-ceasing; if it never begins, it can't end.
4. Non-abiding – Due to being unborn, emptiness also can't dwell anywhere.
5. Undefined – All delusion or illusion resides in the surface of our consciousness, not in the primordial mind of emptiness.
6. Unpurified – If there is no defilement, there can be no purification.
7. No increase – Emptiness cannot increase.
8. No decrease – Emptiness cannot decrease.

If an object is existent, then it is easy to explain the characteristics of the object. But emptiness is primordially a lack of existence, so absolute characteristics cannot be explained. For this reason, it is said that there are no characteristics of emptiness. Absolute truth is not created by cause and conditions, it is intrinsically empty. So, the nature of emptiness is to be unborn, uncreated. If there is no creation, there can be no abiding. And if there is no creation of emptiness, there can be no cessation to emptiness, as there can be no ending without a beginning. There is no delusion, so emptiness is undefined and unpurified, in that if there is no defilement, there can be no purification, as there is nothing to purify. Similarly, there is no decrease and no increase.

These eight profound realisations help us to have some idea of what absolute truth is. For this reason, it is good to read about these eight aspects, to reflect and to meditate on them. Emptiness is one of the most important ingredients on the Buddhist path. But it is not easy to recognise and understand. This is why the Buddha himself explained emptiness in such a detailed way in the *Hundred Thousand Verses*, for the inferior type of mind. For the intermediate type of mind, the Buddha composed the *Twenty Thousand Verses*. And for the most intelligent mind, the Buddha taught the *Eight Thousand Verses*. So, this 25-verse *Heart Sutra* is only a brief introduction for us. It's just like learning to swim. To begin with, we need a small swimming pool in order to learn how to swim, then we can progress to a bigger pool, then one day we have improved so much we can swim in the vast ocean.

## How can we free ourselves from grasping of samsara and nirvana?

When you come into the Dharma, you often hear that the goal is to abandon samsara and attain nirvana. But both exist only in a conventional sense, where something needs to be abandoned and something needs to be attained. In an absolute state, there is no samsara to abandon, and there is no nirvana to attain. In this way, once we have a realisation or an understanding of absolute truth, this can then help us not to grasp at the idea of samsara, and not to grasp at the idea of nirvana – as neither truly exists.

In order to free oneself from this grasping at samsara and nirvana, we must talk about many aspects – how to free ourselves from the five aggregates, the six sources of consciousness, the six objects of consciousness, the eighteen aryanas, the twelve links of interdependent origination, the four noble truths, kaya and wisdom – forming seven topics all together describing how to free ourselves from grasping of samsara and nirvana.

## Role of the two truths in the Dharma

To understand the entirety of the Dharma, one must understand both conventional and absolute truth. As I have already described, conventional truth means that our ordinary perception is conventionally true. Conventionally, there is no room to speak of what exists and what does not exist, for everything exists in the conventional sense.

Therefore, it is very important not to mix up the conventional state and the absolute state. Sometimes I remind people that when you go out of the Buddhist centre into the ordinary world, it is good to share about the Dharma, but then when you come back to the centre, if you bring all the junk from the outside world back with you, this is mixing up the two truths. In coming to a Dharma place, one is supposed to learn Dharma. But if we believe and talk about the outside world, gossiping, trying to appear unique or to talk of different things, this is not the Dharma. One needs to be aware of what type of environment you are in, and on top of that be aware of what is suitable for

everyone around you. One must try not to be different or unique, this is not the Dharma.

Similarly, when we speak in terms of conventional aspects, people sometimes bring in the absolute, as in saying this or that doesn't exist, negating everything. This is also a mistake. Absolute truth is not simply negating that things are existent, but rather that when the supreme mind searches for whether things are there or not, one cannot find anything independently existing. Therefore, we say nothing exists primordially. This is about explaining what absolute reality is, rather than making up something to negate – negation is not absolute truth.

When we speak of the two truths, it is important to know that the Buddha didn't design these two truths. If he had, then it would be made up, not the truth of reality. These two truths are how things are, and the Buddha simply discovered this, and described it as conventional and absolute truth. If one truly wants to know absolute truth, one must also know conventional truth, because conventional truth is used to create a platform or method to learn, to contemplate and to meditate. If this platform didn't exist, then how would one learn, how would one contemplate and meditate? Without these three – learning, contemplating and meditating – how can one understand absolute truth? The conventional platform allows one to discover this inexpressible Truth.

## Freeing ourselves from the five aggregates

We are looking at the innate nature of emptiness (*shilong* in Tibetan), as in the primordial state. The primordial state is a non-conventional state, a non-consciousness state, a non-conceptual state, meaning it has not been made up by the mind. In this state, one cannot find any form, feeling, perception, mental formation or consciousness. This is the absolute, a non-conceptual, non-perception state, always free from the five aggregates.

In an innate state of emptiness, nothing is stopped if it arises. There is no discrimination. Whatever arises has a right to be reflected. For example, a mirror, a lake or any other reflective object is just as valid. Because

anything that appears has a right to be reflected. In this way, out of emptiness, everything is possible.

It may not be best to talk of Vajrayana practices but I will touch on it just a little bit to help illustrate the point. In Vajrayana, we have male deities and female deities. If male and female were truly existent, as we think conventionally, then as a male person it would be impossible to visualise oneself as a female deity. The same if one is a female, it would then not be possible to visualise oneself as a male deity, because one is inherently male or inherently female. But this sense of male and female is only conventional, for in the absolute state, there is no such label as male and female. Therefore, one can be anything.

For this reason, in Vajrayana, there is a mantra called *sunyata* or the emptiness mantra. When one chants this mantra, one dissolves one's identity. When this happens, you are no longer a John or Julie, you are not male or female, you go back to an absolute state. Out of this state, one reconstructs whatever deity you wish to be. So, this allows us to visualise ourselves differently from who we are conventionally. It is emptiness that gives us this opportunity, because if you were not empty by nature then you would remain who you are all the time.

It is also important to realise that, even if we do not want to change, due to cause and conditions, without our will, we must change. Nothing can be forever. In this way, conventional and absolute truth make everything changeable, everything is dying moment by moment. By understanding this concept and practising this truth, when changes happen, they will feel normal.

But when we fix our mind, thinking things will stay the same forever, although this may be our desire, the reality is that we keep changing. Then, when we see these changes happening, we don't accept them, instead we fight against them. Then, one will always be a loser; it is impossible to be the winner of that fight. Many beings who have not come across the Dharma are fighting against innate nature. But when you fight in this way, you can never, ever win. Because we know that innate nature is much more powerful than oneself, so it is better to go with innate nature. This is why all the great masters are always so relaxed, because they have discovered innate nature

and go with it.

The point here is that the empty state is free from all the aggregates, but at the same time, within the state of emptiness everything can arise. This is not a contradiction, it exists. Emptiness appears in the form of the five aggregates, but emptiness is none other than these five aggregates, as we have discussed now many times. In this way, one can free oneself from grasping of form and feeling, et cetera once we know that innate nature is emptiness. This is the way to be free from the five aggregates.

### Freeing ourselves from the six consciousnesses

As described above, the six consciousnesses are eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness and mental consciousness. For each of the six consciousnesses, there is a source – eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind –and an object – form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and perception of phenomena. So, for example, eye consciousness includes a source of consciousness, the eye organ, and an object of consciousness, the visual object seen by the eye.

As already described, when one looks into the innate state of emptiness, you cannot find these six sources of consciousness. Similarly, the object of these six consciousnesses is also not there. If there is no subject, as in the six sources of consciousness, then there can be no object, as in the six objects of consciousness. For how can one talk about these six objects without the six sources? If there are no eyes, how can one explain a visual object? If there are no ears, how can one explain sound, et cetera? All six objects are created by the six sources, so without the sources there can be no objects. Similarly, due to interdependent existence, without the six objects, the six consciousnesses will also not be there.

Once one is aware of the innate nature of these six objects, that is, that they are empty by nature, then there will not be any grasping. I mentioned at the beginning that the prime reason we need to be free from this grasping is to free us from suffering. What then is the relationship between suffering and grasping of the objects of consciousness? The relationship is that, when we



see things as truly existent, this is the cause of forming the mental defilement of grasping. Mental defilement, or grasping, then forms karma. And karma forms the result, which is suffering.

So, the only way we can free ourselves from suffering is to free ourselves from the root cause of suffering, which is the grasping of things. But just saying to oneself, 'I am not going to grasp anymore', is trying to suppress or control grasping by force. This will not work. A better method to free oneself of the grasping mind is to search for the object that you are grasping at, and ask, 'is it really there or not?'. In answer, firstly, in the Dharma it is said that these objects do not exist. Then secondly, after contemplating, you discover that they truly do not exist. Then, once you know that the objects are not truly existent, then the mind has nothing to grasp. Even if you want to grasp, there is nothing to grasp.

Once you know that there are no objects or forms, there is no cause of grasping or defilements, you can see clearly. And when there are no mental defilements, there is no creator of karma. With the absence of karma, the result is that there will be no suffering, the difficulties will not be there. This is the main method to free us from grasping. Due to there being no truly existent subject, as in the six sources of consciousness, then there are no truly existent objects, and you realise that the six objects of consciousness are not really there.

## Freeing ourselves from the eighteen *ayatanas*

The eighteen *ayatanas*, *dhatas* or *skandhas* are based on the six consciousnesses, and compose the knowable elements of things – from a conventional perspective. As already described, for each of the six consciousnesses, there are also six sources of consciousness (the six sense organs) and six objects of consciousness (the six sense objects) – all together these form eighteen *ayatanas*.

This is a very brief teaching on the eighteen *ayatanas*, consisting of the six sense consciousnesses, six sense organs, and six sense objects. As we know, the six consciousnesses consist of the five sense organ consciousnesses

plus mental consciousness. With the five sense organ consciousnesses, the fundamental object is an external physical object. But with mental consciousness, the fundamental object is the mind itself. This is because mental consciousness cannot see a physical object; mental consciousness can only see a mental object. But sense organ consciousness experiences the physical object, not the mental object.

When we say sense organ consciousness experiences the physical object, not the mental object, this is from a conventional point of view. From an absolute point of view, this will seem like a contradiction, because when we try to explain absolute truth we say, firstly, everything is the mind, and secondly, every mind is illusion. The illusion is because this mind may think there is an external physical object, but the object is none other than the mind. In this way, it is not truly existent, and called illusion. So, when we speak from an absolute view, it is said that everything is mind. But when we speak from a conventional view, only mental consciousness is the mind.

Again, please do not get these two confused. Conventionally, we see the physical object, and it is fine to think that it is separate from the mind. But absolutely, we think that nothing is separate from the mind. This may seem contradictory, but it is only contradictory if you mix the absolute and conventional together. We must not mix up these two views. When we say that phenomena exist separately from the mind, we are then speaking of the conventional view of reality, and when we say that the physical object is no other than the mind, we are then speaking of the absolute view of reality.

Conventionally, at this point our life is functioning, and these eighteen ayatanas are why we are functioning as we are, for the eye can see, the ear can hear, the tongue can taste and so forth. But in the innate state of emptiness, none of these elements can be found.

## Freeing ourselves from the twelve links of interdependent origination

In the conventional state, there are twelve links of interdependent origination, or interdependent arising. In essence, the principle of interdependent origination says that all things happen through cause and effect, cause and result. Thus, all phenomena are interdependent; that is, causes don't occur without a result, and results don't occur without a cause. So conventionally, no phenomenon arises except as a reaction to a previous cause.

However, this is due to ignorance. And in the absolute state of no ignorance there is no cause of results, such as old age, sickness and death. In the absolute state, these do not exist. So, when we say the twelve links of interdependent origination do not exist, we are speaking of the absolute state, and when we say the twelve links do exist, we are speaking of the conventional state.

Samsaric and nirvanic aspects of the twelve links of interdependent origination

Now, we will talk briefly about the samsaric aspect of the twelve links of interdependent origination, then move on to the nirvanic aspect of these twelve links, as they represent two different stages.

When we speak of Buddha nature or *Tathagatagarbha*, we say that the innate nature of the mind is free from the four extremes of the mind, that is, thinking of phenomena as existent, non-existent, both or neither. In Tibetan, the four extremes are called *tupa* – yet I am not quite sure if the meaning is the same. *Tupa* means elaborated mind in Tibetan, as in the mind thinking it is existent, or the mind thinking it is non-existent, or the mind thinking it is both, or the mind thinking it is neither. So, when we say something that we are thinking is elaborated, we are referring to the four extremes of the mind.

Again, if one investigates these four extremes, one cannot find any independently existing objects. It is the thought of externally existing objects that creates the object of grasping. So, to be free of grasping, one needs to discover that objects are empty by nature. Once this awareness is there, then the mind of grasping will not be there, as there will be nothing to grasp. This is liberation, the absolute truth, freeing one's mind from the state of

grasping. This is Buddha nature, and this mind or nature resides in every being. Shantideva said: 'Even the mosquito, cockroach, or any insect, if they meet the right conditions, they also have the potential to attain Buddhahood'. The reason is that every sentient being possesses Buddha nature, not just human beings.

Buddha nature is pure primordially, which means that from the beginning it has never been deluded. Yet, we fail to recognise this, due to simultaneously born ignorance. This ignorance means that instead of realising this Buddha nature, we see our nature as 'me' or 'I', and grasp onto this sense of independent self. Within Buddha nature, there are no characteristics, as in 'you' or 'me'. This identity of self does not exist. Buddha nature is free from all identities and free from the four elaborated states. But we fail to recognise this and see our nature as 'me'. And when we wrongly label our state as 'me', the grasping starts. This is the first step in grasping, due to the ignorance of one's mind.

When this ignorance originated no one can say, for it is from beginningless time. But ever since we have had this flame of ignorance, we have kept it burning, it has never extinguished. This is how ignorance was formed. This ignorance is what keeps us in samsara life after life. Due to this ignorance, we have a concept of self. This ignorance is what we call the karmic formation. Karma is the design of the mind – shaped as a positive, negative and neutral design of the mind. Karma is like an artist that draws one's mind. Whatever karma one may have, from this, consciousness will develop. For instance, if we look at a dog, they have the same six consciousnesses that we do. But a dog's eye looks and sees one thing, while a human eye can look at the same object, but we will not see it as the same. Similarly, a dog can hear a sound as we can hear the sound, but it will be received in a different way. The differences are that one has the karma of a human and the other of an animal. So karmically, things are perceived in different ways.

In this way, karma is the creator of the different consciousnesses, and one's consciousness chooses what kind of next life one will have. Whatever karma is created in this life, will then search for one's next life. So, it is oneself who chooses one's futures lives. No one else can choose for you.

Then, whether we have a human consciousness or an animal consciousness, this very consciousness is the creator of the five aggregates – form, feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness – all being created by this human or animal consciousness.

If one has a human consciousness, it will create human aggregates. The human consciousness will then create the name (consciousness aggregate) and form (form, feeling, perception and mental factor aggregates). In this way, consciousness is conceived in the mother's womb. Then, over nine months, that consciousness will form into the five aggregates. Gradually these five aggregates will form, or more precisely, activate the six sources of consciousnesses (eye, ear, nose, et cetera). First, there is a subtle form aggregate, then eventually, it will activate the eye to the mental consciousness.

After this is completed, then we take birth, through what is called the karmic air pressure, which comes from the mother's womb. Then the baby is pushed out. This is how karma even helps us to give birth. Yet these days, people don't necessarily follow karma, they may have a caesarean birth, though it is meant to be karma helping with the kind of birth we have.

Then, soon after one is born, our consciousness meets with the object of first contact, and we think it is new. For instance, as soon as a calf is born, it starts to suckle from the mother. But how does this being know how to seek the milk instantly? We think the calf is smart, but it is the habit of past lives. Many times before it has been born as a calf, and was used to drinking milk from the mother. So automatically, through habit, it leads the calf there to suckle from the mother. Similarly, birds can make a beautiful nest. We humans think they are so clever. But again, it is a habit, it has been done a million times before.

Similarly, as a human, a lot of what we do is through repetition. Nothing is new, it just comes in different forms. For example, how often do we wear different designs of clothing in different colours? The clothing may look like it is different, but it is basically all the same clothing. We think that by putting a bit of white on top of red or blue, it is new, but actually it is the same clothing.

Through our mental habits, when we are born, we make contact with

objects. So, the first thing that happens is that our consciousness is in contact with an object. After one's consciousness has made contact, then feeling comes, as in when you smell something you can feel it, and when you see something you can feel it. If there were no contact, there would be nothing to feel. Feeling comes as a result of the contact. This is how form and feeling are created.

After feeling comes desire. If you have contact with something that is pleasant, then you enjoy it; if you feel something that is uncomfortable, you reject it. So, feeling leads to a strong desire to either adopt or reject the feelings that arise. This desire mind leads us to craving, as in 'I really like this' or 'I want more', and one is never satisfied. Similarly, anger can come from this craving, as in 'I don't like this', and then we reject the feelings. This craving leads to 'becoming'.

Within the twelve links of interdependent origination we speak of three lifetimes – past, present and future lives. The past life is from grasping of self up to development of consciousness. After development of consciousness in the mother's womb, we form the aggregates, consciousness, contact, feeling and craving. This is the present life. Then with 'becoming', one is establishing and creating karma for future lives. Then, one day we die physically. But mentally, we have enough karma to form a new life. So then, we take birth again, have the next life, then die. Therefore, we are wandering in samsara from life to life, beginning with ignorance, then to karmic formation, consciousness, name and form – this is why in Buddhism we are called the wandering beings.

Now, how to free ourselves from this wandering state is a question that concerns the nirvanic aspect of the twelve links of interdependence. Here we must talk about the selflessness of person. In Tibetan, when we say *khonsakem*, we mean the 'person' that exists conventionally; when we say *khonsake dhanye*, we mean the 'self', which does not even exist conventionally or absolutely. That is, even at a conventional level, if the self truly existed, then one must think about the body as the self, mind as the self, what we say as the self – which one is the self? Clearly, none of these things on their own is the self.

So, do we think of body, mind, speech and self as one, or body, mind, speech

and self as separate? There are only these two possibilities. None of these individually is self, so then you might say that self is separate from body, mind and speech. But then, where can you point to the self without the body, mind and speech? One cannot find a self separate from these. In this way, even conventionally we can see that the self does not exist. But the person exists, as in 'me' as a person. Person and self are slightly different.

This is one way to describe the selflessness of person. Another way can be to think, 'What kind of phenomena make up 'me'?' This is important to think about. The person is made out of six elements: earth, water, fire, space, air and consciousness. When we look at a person, the six elements are:

1. the physical solidness of the body, created by the earth element
2. the moisture in the body, created by the water element
3. the warmth in the body, created by the fire element
4. the stomach, nostrils, ear, et cetera, created by the space element
5. breathing in and out, getting oxygen, created by the air element
6. awareness of thought, created by the consciousness element.

So, each person is composed of these six elements. But, when one asks, 'Where is the self other than these six elements?', one cannot find it.

From this analysis, we know that grasping of the self is like being a schizophrenic person. When they hear a sound, is that sound real or not? If it is real, then why can't others hear that sound? It is because they don't have the mind to hear it, because the sound is mentally created. In this way, we are all samsaric schizophrenics, hearing mentally created sounds and grasping at the self – just kidding!

But once we know that the innate nature of the self is selflessness, then there will be no grasping. This selflessness is buddha nature or *dharmakaya*. As soon as we realise that our nature is *dharmakaya*, ignorance will cease. When there is no ignorance, there is nothing to form karma, as ignorance is the karma creator. When there is no karma, then there is no creator of consciousness. When there is no consciousness, then there is no rebirth, nothing to conceive. When there is no conception, there is no establishment

of the name and form aggregate and the eighteen aryanas.

When there is nothing to conceive, then there is nothing there to take rebirth. When there is no birth, there is no contact, no feeling, no craving, no clinging, no becoming. So then there is no birth and no death. This is nirvana, for nirvana is just a name for the absence of all this wandering. This is the nirvana aspect of the twelve links of interdependent origination.

## Freeing ourselves from the Four Noble Truths

Now we discuss how to free ourselves from the *Four Noble Truths*, that is: the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path to cessation of suffering – with the path being the absolute view.

### *The truth of suffering*

‘The truth of suffering’ refers to the three types of suffering: suffering of suffering, suffering of change and suffering of pervasive conditions. But in the profound empty state, you cannot find these three types of suffering, for suffering only exists at the mental level. As long as consciousness is there, there will always be suffering.

But this raises an issue. Here we are talking about the truth of the path as being the absolute view. At other times, when we say the truth of the path, we are talking about developing bodhisattva consciousness. But as described above, consciousness is impermanent, like all compounded phenomena, and it is often said that the nature of suffering is impermanence. So, if consciousness is impermanent, and impermanence is suffering, then the mind of bodhisattva can suffer. So, even a bodhisattva is not free from suffering. They are free from the suffering of suffering and the suffering of change, but not the suffering of pervasive conditions. This can only end when one attains Buddhahood.

This shows that, as long as we have consciousness, suffering will exist. But when we investigate the nature of this consciousness, it is emptiness. At that



level, none of that suffering exists. So, it is the innate primordial nature of the mind that is free from the truth of suffering. In this context, when we say the truth of the path, we actually mean the primordial mind. The primordial mind is beyond impermanence, so there is no suffering. So, we are talking about the primordial mind, not the consciousness mind.

### *The truth of the origin of suffering*

Similarly, when we talk of the profound empty state, there is no origin of suffering. The origin of suffering refers to where suffering originated. Suffering originates from three factors, or creators, the same as interdependent origination. The root factor is ignorance, as in the grasping of self. The second factor is mental defilement, as in the sense of 'me', 'I', 'I don't like others', desire, anger and so forth. The third factor is our actions – that is, out of our mental state we act vocally and physically, and under the influence of these thoughts is karma. All suffering comes from these three factors, nothing else. But in the innate profound state of emptiness, these three creators of suffering do not exist, so suffering cannot exist as there is nothing to create it.

### *The truth of the cessation of suffering*

Cessation of suffering is nirvana; nirvana is nothing but cessation. We are practising to attain nirvana, because when there is cessation, there is no more suffering nor causes of suffering – this is nirvana.

When we say no suffering, normally we instantly think in terms of gross suffering, because when there is no gross suffering, we think we are happy. For example, when we do something that brings us a lot of joy, in this joyful state we often say, 'I am so happy!'. This may be true at that particular time, but if one truly investigates it, one is not really completely happy. Because the suffering of change is there and the suffering of pervasive conditions is there, too. But we do not recognise this at the time, thinking we are happy.

Another example is, when we do shamatha meditation, it leads us to be

free from the suffering of change and the suffering of suffering – but only temporarily, not ultimately. Yet, when one is free from these two sufferings, one feels complete peace, and then you think you are almost enlightened! But this is a big mistake. Because when you are in that state, you feel full of joy, due to not experiencing any gross suffering. So, then you want to stay in that state for a long time. But as a Dharma practitioner, our goal is to attain arhatship or buddhahood as soon as possible. So, from a Dharma point of view, it is a disadvantage if one spends too much time in that state. It can become an obstacle, delaying one in attaining the greater result of arhatship or buddhahood. So, a Dharma practitioner should not go into a form or formless dhyana state. We must remember what the purpose of meditation is – not temporary relief, but ultimate freedom. This is important. This is cessation.

Of course, from an innate buddha nature perspective, there is nothing to attain. As I mentioned previously, when you realise the state of emptiness, the absolute state, there is nothing to gain. Because, if there were something to gain, that would mean there was something to lose. But in the absolute state, there is nothing to gain, for there is nothing to lose. It is beyond gain and loss.

### *The truth of the path that leads to cessation*

Due to having nothing to gain or lose, the truth of the path that leads to cessation also does not exist in the absolute state – because why would one go on a path unless it is to gain something?

So, the absolute state is beyond the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths only exist in the conventional state.

### Freeing ourselves from kaya and dhyana

As we have just said, in the absolute state there is nothing to gain or lose, and no path to go on. It is extremely hard to find the right word in English to describe the absolute state. There is no word to match the Tibetan word, *ying*,

or the Sanskrit word, *dharmata*, for the true nature of reality. The absolute state is beyond thought and beyond mind. In the absolute state everything is perfect, always perfect. This is an inseparable state, there is no distinguishing between mind and other than mind, because the mind is in awareness of absolute truth, and absolute truth is itself an inseparable state.

So, in this state there is nothing to gain in the kayas (different manifestations of Buddha) or dhyanas (stages of meditation). There is nothing to gain in the primordial mind, for everything is already realised. Often, we talk of the primordial mind as the dharmakaya, but only in the conventional state, because in the absolute there is nothing to obtain.

But you may ask, 'If there is nothing to obtain in the kayas, then why do people see the rupakaya, that is, the two form manifestations of Buddha as nirmanakaya Buddha, and sambhogakaya Buddha?' The answer is to think about what is the path that leads to buddhahood. The main path is bodhicitta, meaning that one is engaged in this practice to attain buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. So then, when one attains buddhahood, even though there is no natural thought of manifesting in a form body, in order to help other sentient beings it is helpful for them to be able to perceive you in a physical form, that is, as nirmanakaya or sambhogakaya, to enable them to receive the teachings. The kaya and dhyani are only relevant to the conventional state, not the absolute state.

So, from the perspective of the one who is receiving the teachings, we think we are seeing these kaya forms. But from the perspective of the Buddha, he is beyond thought and is turning the wheel of dharma. His nature is to turn the wheel of dharma whether one requests it or not, in the same way that the nature of the sun is to always be light. We may talk of daytime and night time, but this is from a geographical perspective. The sun itself doesn't have day and night, it always has light. Globally, the sun never sleeps, 24/7 wherever the sun goes there is always light. In this way, the Buddha is like the sun, for he never stops turning the wheel of dharma.

When we talk about liberation or enlightenment, we often want to know what our current state is – 'Am I liberated? Am I free?' But remember that 'liberation' is just a name. You will know you are liberated in the moment

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mental delusion is stopped or exhausted. In that very moment, one is free, one is liberated. In order to explain this to others, we label and give a name to this as 'liberation', but it is just a name, there is no actual state to be attained.

Quite often I emphasise that, when one says I am going to practise to attain buddhahood, this goal should not be based on feeding the desire mind, the desire to attain buddhahood. This is not a Buddhist practice. Buddhist practice is based on exhausting, not feeding, the desire mind. When one's desire is exhausted, then one is liberated from desire mind. When one's anger is exhausted, then one is liberated from anger mind. This is called nirvana, which is freedom from suffering. So, it is a freedom, not an attainment. Other than freedom, cessation, nothing is obtainable. Simple freedom from the illusion is what we call buddhahood. So, do not think that when you become a Buddha, your skin will turn into a gold colour and you will sit like a statue. There will be no form, just emptiness.

# Summary of Emptiness

Now, we will summarise the nature of emptiness.

## Every phenomenon is nothing other than mind

The first step is to realise that all appearances, samsara and nirvana, every phenomenon without any exception, is nothing other than mind. It is good to come to this conclusion. But not by forcing yourself. Forcing yourself is not a healthy approach. Instead, think about it. Ask yourself, 'In every aspect of a phenomenon, can I prove anything exists that does not come from the mind?' Put effort into this reflection.

Based on this question, when one investigates, researches and explores, one day the time will come that you realise you cannot find anything that is not from the mind. At this point, there must be a decision, not to force yourself to think that everything is mind, but to have discovered this, because you cannot prove that anything is other than mind. So, we need to work towards this conclusion; we need to try to get to this point.

The great Indian master, Shantideva, explained that when you hear about hell beings in a Buddhist context – as in the hot hell realms, with burning ground, burning weapons cutting one's body and so forth – in reality the hell realm does not exist, in the sense of a geographical place where someone can be born and is burning themselves. One cannot find this place geographically. It is the mind that experiences this place. Whatever the mind is experiencing, in that moment is a reality to that person. But outside of the mind, there is no hell realm. Again, when one is in a deep state of depression, looking at

the world, what one sees no one else can see. But that moment is a reality to you. It is that reality that makes you depressed. If it weren't your reality, then when you perceive a negative world it would not have the power to make you depressed. In this way, Shantideva says, 'Everything is mind'.

Similarly, when we say, 'I have attained buddhahood', this is mind. It is due to having a huge virtuous mind, and this virtuous mind thinks, 'I am Buddha'. For without the mind, there is no Buddha. Hell is an aspect of the mind, and heaven is an aspect of the mind. Shantideva explained this. Similarly, when speaking of preciousness, the most precious thing is our mind. There is nothing more precious than the mind. Because outside of this mind, there is no Buddha. It is the mind that ceases the illusion, the mind that awakens. This awakened mind is the Buddha.

In this way, one should not search for Buddha beyond one's own mind. This very mind is the place to search for Buddha, to stop this illusion. To do this, we need to find what absolute truth is – truth of self and of phenomena. The more we discover this, the more we will spontaneously stop conceiving self and phenomena as separate, the delusion will naturally stop. When all the delusion has ceased, there is no more to delude, one is awakened. This is buddhahood. So, the mind is the place to look for buddhahood.

## Every phenomenon is free from the four extremes

The next step is to realise that this luminosity or clarity of mind, the nature of the clear mind, is free from the four extremes. You cannot say phenomena are existent, non-existent, both or neither. Being free of the four extremes is the nature of the mind. There are no differences between this nature of the mind and all phenomena. The nature of every phenomenon is free from the four extremes. It's like everything having one taste. There is no nature of the mind and a separate nature of phenomena. Nature of the mind and phenomena is the same thing. In this way, in the absolute state, there is all one taste.

The great Indian master, Nagarjuna, stated: 'One cannot find one single phenomenon outside of interdependent origination, for every phenomenon

is of interdependent origination'. The meaning of this is that, because everything is interdependent, every phenomenon is empty. Without emptiness, nothing would exist, because everything is interdependent. The nature of interdependence is emptiness.

What allows samsara and nirvana is just the mere luminous state of mind. Luminosity of mind allows us to reflect samsara and nirvana, but the reflection does not exist in the way we see it. For example, as I said before, if we look at a lake or mirror, these things allow reflection. But if you look closely at the reflection in the lake or mirror, you will not be able to find anything there. Another example is the rainbow. In the distance you can see it is beautiful and colourful, but when you go closer it is impossible to find. The appearance is there, but its true nature is lack of existence. So, all phenomena have an appearance that looks real, but when one searches, there is nothing to find.

## Everything comes from the mind

The great master Saraha said that the seed of everything you wish to attain is only in your mind. Whether you will be born in the hell realm, hungry ghost realm, human realm, deva or god realm, or arhat state or buddhahood state, everything comes from the mind. For outside of the mind nothing can be attained, nothing can be born. Mind is the root or seed of everything.

Here we are not referring to sense organ consciousness, we are talking about mental consciousness being the seed to everything. When we look into the workings of the mind, we can see that one thought leads to many other secondary thoughts.

So, if one sincerely wishes to attain nirvana, liberation or buddhahood, then it is good to think that the Dharma practitioner is like a tailor, who designs their own clothing. In a similar way, one has to design one's own mind. And what you design, accordingly will come to you. One cannot think that someone else is going to design your mind; you are your own designer, and the way you shape your mind, according to that is what will happen. Following the Dharma is putting all the responsibility back onto oneself. No

one else is responsible for what happens to you in your life, for whatever happens to you is your own responsibility, because it comes from your own mind. This is the reality.

Teaching the Dharma is introducing others to the nature of the mind. As I mentioned earlier, when you study the Dharma, you are not learning someone's belief, someone's philosophy or someone's idea – when you are learning the Dharma, you are learning about your own mind. As a Buddhist, I have a good friend who is a very learned Dharma scholar, much greater than me. I try to encourage him to teach, but he says he is not qualified enough to teach and is way too shy to teach. The reason for this shyness is not because he does not have the knowledge and understanding to teach, it's because teaching the Dharma is an extremely serious activity. Because the teacher is introducing someone to the nature of the mind, it is very serious. For example, think of a doctor who is about to operate on you – how serious is this, because just one mistake can cost a patient's life. And when it comes to the mind, it is even more serious than that, because it can affect not just this life, but future lives. In this way, my senior friend who is a great scholar is reluctant to teach, because he thinks it is risky to teach, because Dharma teachers are supposed to teach about the nature of someone's mind, and if you make a tiny mistake, that person can go down the wrong path.

In regard to myself as a teacher, I am always careful to tell people that this is my point of view but you must investigate for yourself, by reading authentic Dharma books. I can only help so much in giving you some idea of the Dharma, but in the end, you must put in the effort to study and contemplate it. Then, once you get an accurate understanding, only then should you put it into practice.

For this reason, teaching the Dharma is not a simple job. It's not like someone just reads a book and then knows what to say. The teacher is dealing with the mind, so we need to be as accurate as possible. The *Heart Sutra* introduces one to the nature of the mind accurately. And once you know your mind, then you know that outside of the mind there are no gods, outside of the mind there are no demons – all these gods and demons come from your mind only. Likewise, there is no Buddha outside your mind, the



Buddha is your mind. Normally, we are rushing here and there trying to find Buddha. But there is no Buddha out there; everything is in our mind. For example, when one is angry, one's mind turns into a demon; when one's mind is in the bodhicitta, one is a kind person. So, outside of the mind, nothing exists.

## How to practise the Heart Sutra

Up to this point, we have explained the *Perfection of Wisdom*. Now, we will hear a little bit about the value of the *Perfection of Wisdom* or absolute truth, and some advice on how to practise the *Perfection of Wisdom*.

Once one has heard this teaching, the best way to progress this understanding is to practise more and more, but not only while you are sitting, also when you are out in the world. Because normally, when we are out in the world, we get caught up looking at beautiful things or upset by bad things, et cetera – at this time it is important to remember the Dharma. If you do not bring the Dharma into all your life, then your personality will only change when you visit the Buddhist centre, but outside the centre you will still be the same person, nothing will change. Then what kind of Dharma are you studying?

Being a Dharma practitioner means to be the same when at the Buddhist centre or out of the centre. There is not a certain place or time when you look after your mind, you need to watch your mind always. This is the advice on practising the *Perfection of Wisdom*. By learning this there is tremendous benefit, because there are many virtuous results. So, meditate on absolute truth – there is nothing greater than this, from the point of view of this life. Then from the point of view of future lives, if one is truly connected to this wisdom and lives with this wisdom, there is no doubt that you will be reborn in the same situation in future lives, so then you can progress further with this perfection of wisdom.

At the point one attains liberation, this is the time you realise absolute truth. At this very moment of realisation, one becomes liberated. Until that time, it is not possible to attain that state. This liberation comes from what you have learned, what you have practised, and then you try to develop the realisation

of absolute truth.

## Benefits of practising the Heart Sutra

The benefit of practising the *Perfection of Wisdom* is that once you know absolute truth, this realisation will free you from all types of obscuration, such as the obscuration of defilement, the obscuration of gross and subtle defilements, everything. Obscuration here means ignorance, grasping. Once you realise absolute truth, you will not be grasping, you will be free from grasping. This is how we become free from mental obscurations. Not only that, but when there is no grasping, there will be no karmic formation. Then, when there is no karmic formation, there is no suffering. This is how to be free. For when there is no karma, there can have been no past grasping. And when there is no grasping, there can be no future karma generated.

The root cause of all fear is ignorance mind. Ignorance is grasping, grasping at everything as if it is real. As long as one continues to grasp at everything as real, this ignorance is then the source of all the fear one experiences. This fear will never stop until the mind is free from ignorance. The only way to stop this fear is through the realisation of absolute truth. For when one realises absolute truth, there is no ignorance. The result is that fear of suffering, fear of death, fear of sickness – all of this will cease. Because the moment you extinguish the fire, naturally the smoke will stop. As long as the fire is burning, even if you want the smoke to go away, it will not, because the creator of the smoke is the fire burning. We don't want the smoke, but we want to burn the fire. To realise absolute truth is the only method to free us from fear and free us from samsara.

The *Perfection of Wisdom*, being the realisation of the true nature of self and all phenomena, is three times the mother of a Buddha, in that this realisation makes a person a Buddha of the past, present and future. So, the *Prajnaparamita* is the mother of the past, present and future Buddhas. Other than this *Perfection of Wisdom* there is no other source to attain Buddhahood.

## Perfection of Wisdom mantra

Returning to the Heart Sutra, towards the end of the Sutra the mantra of the Perfection of Wisdom is presented. This is the perfect mantra.

*TADYATHA OM GATE GATE PARA GATE SAMGATE BODHI SVAHA*

The meaning of *tadyatha* is 'to come this way'. When we recite *om*, it has eight different types of meaning, based on uncommon attainments, on auspiciousness and so many other meanings. But in this case, it is a greeting, like *tashi delek*. I am not sure if *tashi delek* is an ancient greeting or not, but it is commonly used these days. *Tashi delek* is very significant, for when we say *tashi* it means auspicious causes and conditions. Then, the right cause and the right condition create the result, which is *delek*. A good result is that, conventionally, one will be comfortable in this life, then in the absolute, one will be perfected into buddhahood. So, the greeting is wishing one to have a good cause and to have a good result. That is the meaning of this greeting. So, here *om* means, begin with creating the right auspicious cause, which will then lead to a good result. Even though *om* may have multiple meanings, this is what it means in this context, *tashi delek*.

*Gate gate* means to 'go'. For ordinary bodhisattvas who have not entered the path yet, the first *gate* means go to the path of accumulation. And for those who are already on the path of accumulation, the second *gate* means go onto the next level, the path of application. This is the meaning of *gate gate*.

Next, *para gate* means that one goes to a more excellent stage – the path of enlightenment. So, this means to go from the path of accumulation to the path of seeing (the first bhumi). *Para samgate* means to go to an even more excellent stage, as in the path of meditation, from the second to tenth bhumi states. Then lastly, *bodhi svaha* means to go from meditation to buddhahood. It is a reminder that when we are reciting this mantra, that we are in samsara and need to remember what we can achieve in this life, which is to attain the path of accumulation, the path of application, the path of seeing, the path of meditation, and then one day, buddhahood. It is a reminder to our mundane mind to think of more than what we should prepare for lunch and dinner. Rather than thinking of food, for example, we must prepare for these four

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paths. So, this mantra means the auspiciousness to pay respect to the path to buddhahood.

At the end of the Heart Sutra, the Buddha says, 'Well done, well done'. This means that when Shariputra asked the question, it was the right question and the right words. And when Avalokiteshvara answered, it was the correct answer and the words that were used in the answer were the correct words. In this way, Buddha acknowledged both Shariputra and Avalokiteshvara. And when the disciples heard this *Perfection of Wisdom* teaching, it changed their minds, and they developed a great sense of faith. Now they could bow and pay respect to the Buddha.

We have now completed, in a brief way, the *Heart Sutra* teaching. As I mentioned, this is an extremely difficult topic, but within the limits of my own knowledge of the *Heart Sutra*, and within this short period of time, we have tried to cover as much as we can. However, as I said before, we need to learn and study this sutra much more than a hundred times before we can expect to get a clear idea of emptiness – just once will not be enough.

Let us finish by chanting the mantra from the Heart Sutra:

*TADYATHA OM GATE GATE PARA GATE SAMGATE BODHI SVAHA*