



Practicing Prajna Paramita

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Every day we chant the *Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra*: "Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva when practicing deeply the *prajna paramita* perceived that all five *skandhas* in their own being are empty and was saved from all suffering. Form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness are also like this," which points to the fact that every thing depends on everything else. Nothing exists by itself. What is this *prajna paramita* that Avalokitesvara is practicing?

Avalokitesvara's practice is our practice. So what is our everyday practice of *prajna paramita*? "Paramita" is a word that has two meanings. One is "perfection," and the other is, "gone" or "going beyond." The *Heart Sutra* ends with the mantra "*gate gate, paragate parasamgate, bodhi svaha!*" [gone, gone, gone beyond, altogether beyond]. "Going beyond" implies that there is this shore and that shore. This shore is the shore of suffering and the other shore is the shore of release and liberation. So how are we going to get from the shore of self-clinging and suffering to the shore of liberation? My old teacher Suzuki Roshi use to say that when you know how to live correctly on this shore, you are already on the other shore. There really is no place to go.

This word "*prajna*" means wisdom, but not wisdom in the usual sense. It is the wisdom of non-duality; the reconciliation of opposites. This is the important part. How do we practice the wisdom of the reconciliation of opposites, the duality of oneness and the oneness of duality?

There are six modes of practice, the Six Paramitas, which are the practices of *prajna paramita*. We usually call them simply, the Six Paramitas. But more accurately they are the Six *prajna paramitas*. The word *prajna* is very important here. If we only think of them as six *paramitas* we can easily fall into a dualistic self-improvement scheme, but if we keep in mind that these are six practices of *prajna* that lead to liberation then we will have some understanding of how to embody the practice which is expressed in the *Heart Sutra*. The *Heart Sutra* simply expresses the intellectual understanding, which of course expresses the heart of all the *Prajna Paramita* Sutras, but in order for this understanding to be realized it should be practiced. How do we do that?

The six *prajna paramitas* are generosity, noble conduct, patience, enthusiastic effort, meditation, and *prajna* itself. Usually we think in terms of a linear progression. I like to think of it as a circle. Because the first *paramita*, which is generosity, or *dana*, and the last one *prajna*, are really the two most important ones. When they are in a circle they are side by side instead of at the two ends. *Prajna*, which is non-dual wisdom, permeates all of them, as does generosity. As a matter of fact, each one contains all the others, so there are thirty-six in all, and each one is based on *prajna*.

The first one, *dana*, means generosity in all of its aspects. Pure *dana* is giving, beyond any special purpose or attachment. Giving for the sake of giving itself. And it includes not just material gifts. Sometimes we offer a material gift to curry favor. We donate money or we give someone a present and we look for the feedback. "Can you put my name on a plaque?" or, "did you like it?" There is generosity here but it is easily tainted. There are many levels of generosity. Pure generosity is simply giving and forgetting. We say, "The emptiness of the giver, the gift, and the one who receives." So with an empty hand I offer an empty gift to an empty receiver and pure gratitude arises. Simply giving is enough. Sometimes it is beneficial to give a gift anonymously. But even if we give a gift anonymously we should be careful about pride. All of these tainted aspects are dualistic. Ultimately the greatest gift is a free offering.

For a Bodhisattva, for a Zen student, the gift of *dharma* is most important. *Dharma* is freely given without any thought of return. Throughout the year we give zazen instruction to people but never expect anything in return. We simply give the gift without any expectation because giving without expectation is an expression of our inmost nature. As a Zen student, when we come to practice, we bring our ego and lay it at the feet of Buddha. My old teacher used to say that we are half ordinary being, and half Buddha. Sometimes Buddha and myself are cooperating. Sometimes I'm leading and sometimes Buddha is leading. There can be a lot of tension or conflict there. But when one finally comes to practice and has a realization of what that is, one can offer oneself to the

practice, freely giving, even though problems arise. Sometimes we resist that. But nevertheless, even though there is resistance we freely give our self without expectations, and little by little our ego becomes absorbed by Buddha. Given time, I let Buddha lead and I follow.

When we first come to practice we, of course, are doing something for ourselves, but as our practice matures we realize we are also practicing for others. Both reasons are good. But there is still some taint of duality. Pure practice is simply practice for the sake of practice. When we practice for the sake of practice, others are taken care of and I am taken care of. Everything is included, and we let go of partiality. So maybe the main thing in generosity is impartiality, and this is how *prajna* permeates generosity.

The second *prajna paramita* is "noble conduct." Sometimes it is called "morality." It includes ethics and morality. Noble conduct is Buddha's conduct, which is the basis of our precepts. We call Buddha the noble one. Buddha's conduct is impartial, not attached to good and bad, not attached to right and wrong, not attached to love and hate. Nevertheless, good and bad arise. Right and wrong arise. Love and hate arise. They are constantly arising in us. So we have precepts, which are guidelines for how to conduct ourselves with one another in a correct way, and how we relate to our surroundings in a compassionate, intelligent, and wise way.

Sometimes in the close quarters of practice we bump into each other, make judgments, get angry and create problems. That's when it 's important to have reconciliation of some sort. So in order to begin that process, the best way is to bring forth forgiveness instead of dwelling in self-righteousness. We can get lost in righteousness and retaliation. I am right and you are wrong. I am doing things well you are doing things badly. You did this to me and I will get you. So what forgiveness allows us to do is to rise above partiality, and, although it involves the other person, it basically frees our self. Forgiveness is letting go of our mental and emotional bondage to the other. It allows us to get beyond our pain so we can have some freedom. Through anger and resentment we become bound to the other person and we lose our freedom. It is different than reconciliation. It has to precede reconciliation.. Reconciliation may or may not be possible, but that is another matter. When I realize that my adversary and myself are one as well as two, we can free ourselves. This is *prajna*.

The third *prajna paramita* is "patience." We usually think of patience as waiting patiently for something, or forbearance. Forbearance is long suffering. Katagiri Roshi use to say that we must bear the unbearable. That was a Japanese saying that came into prominence when they lost the second World War. But patience, in the sense of *prajna*, is not simply waiting. It is being present where we are, "Settling the self on the self," without getting out of sync with our rhythm. Patience has to do with time and space. Time is now, and place is here. Patience is at the crossroads, at the edge. Although you may be waiting for something, if what you are waiting for doesn't arrive you are still okay. That's our practice. Accepting difficulty and accepting ease. Grasping, we want something and become anxious if we don't get it, and, in aversion, we don't want something and get anxious about it's coming. To be settled in the composure of zazen in our daily life, and to be free to act spontaneously, is great patience. If it comes, no problem; if it goes, let it go. That is freedom.

The fourth *prajna paramita* I like to call "enthusiastic effort." It is also called "zeal." When we begin to practice we are usually motivated by inspiration. Inspiration is wonderful because it gives us purpose, direction and optimism. As beginners we put a lot of effort into our practice and our inspiration carries us, like a love affair. But after awhile, whatever we do starts to wobble. So how do we keep our practice from getting old? How do we maintain that vitality? When we expect something, we may get it, but once we get it, then we need something else. We also have success and failure. When my practice "gets old" I may wonder, why am I spending my time doing this? What am I getting out of this seemingly repetitive activity? What is the payback?

In practice there is no expectation of payback. We simply give ourselves to practice. The goal of practice is to not get something. It is simply letting go. It is just the opposite of usual ambition. To let go and not expect anything is the foundation for serenity. Serenity leads to joy and joy leads to enthusiasm, and the way becomes enthusiastic and effortless. Even though we don't expect anything, or maybe because we don't, there are benefits and blessings. But if we practice for that reason it doesn't work. We have the term "effortless effort"—it is not hard and it is not easy. There is riding the wave and following the wave. When you are surfing and you catch a big wave you wait for just the right moment for the wave to crest. When you are riding the wave you are also driving the wave. You can't tell whether you are riding or driving. It's that kind of ease. The wave and you are one. You and the horse are one. This is non-dual practice. Dogen calls it turning and being turned.

When you are in a leading position then you are turning the practice, and when you are in a following position you are being lead by the practice. You should know which is which. Sometimes leading and sometimes following, but when you lead you are also following, and when you are following you are also leading with perfect balance, perfect coordination, perfect harmony. When we are all practicing together in this way, *prajna* arises and illuminates our world. This is patience beyond patience.

The fifth *prajna paramita* is *dhyana*, which, as you know, is a Sanskrit word meaning "meditation." In China it became *chana*, and in Japan it became *zenna*, which means sitting in Zen. The word *samadhi* is synonymous with *dhyana* or Zen. So what is *dhyana*? What is Zen sitting and what is *samadhi* that is sometimes called "imperturbability"? Sitting in an immobile way?

In zazen we have this seat that is very stable and very hard to turn over. That is one reason why we sit this way, it's a nice stable position. So in zazen we establish this stable position and find the balance, flexibility, and ease within this total dynamic effort. Within this effort the whole body/mind is cooperating. Body, mind, and breath are harmonizing in an unconditioned way without grasping or aversion to whatever comes and goes, while not being turned over by anything. In other words it is simply letting go as an offering to the universe and returning home.

This is what I mean by unconditioned: As we grow up our postures are formed or shaped through our conditioning. We protect ourselves in various ways from our fears and anxieties and we carry various burdens, feelings, emotions, ideas, fantasies, and delusions, which determine the way we carry ourselves and condition our postures. Zazen is letting go of our conditioning and returning to our original posture. It's not so easy. It may take years of practice, although some can do it right away. In zazen there is no fear, although sometimes people feel that as well as anger. And of course we have painful legs and so forth. To be able to accept painfulness without being attached, along with stability, patience and composure, is the foundation for *samadhi* and *prajna*. Pain is pain, and suffering is what I don't like about it.

The sixth *prajna paramita* is the *paramita* of *prajna* itself. *Prajna* is non-dual wisdom. A good way to express *prajna* is like this: Your right hand is correct and your left hand is wrong. The right hand is good and left hand is bad. The right hand is love and left hand is hate. Then you put the two palms together and bow. This is the oneness of opposites, the gesture of reconciliation. So when you put your palms together you are practicing the non-duality of *prajna* even if you don't understand what it is. We bow to each other, we bow to our cushion, we bow to cats and dogs. We bow to trees and pillars. And in that moment, at the bottom of the bow, everything disappears and is reconciled. We can practice bowing all the time whether our palms are together or not. It just depends on our attitude. But this is our expression and this is how we enter.

We can say that the five fingers of the right hand are Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Arahats, Pratyeka Buddhas, and Devas. And the five fingers of the left hand are the heavenly realm, the hell realm, the animal realm, the fighting demon realm, and the hungry ghost realm. We migrate through these realms every day of our lives. Enlightened Buddha mind, and ordinary mind find their unity when we put our palms together in this bow. At that moment we enter the realm of release.

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